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IT PAYS TO BE GOOD

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

SHEPHERDESS OF SHEEP

THE WHICHARTS

PARSON'S NINE

TOPS AND BOTTOMS

THE CHILDREN'S MATINÉE

(Plays for Children)

IT PAYS TO BE GOOD

BY

NOEL STREATFEILD



WILLIAM HEINEMANN LTD

LONDON

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TORONTO

FIRST PUBLISHED 1936

PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN
AT THE WINDMILL PRESS, KINGSWOOD, SURREY

To Selene Moxon

Dear Moxie,

A tendency in my other efforts to attempt to make everybody lovable, has caused me, for the good of my soul, to produce Virginia. Obviously you are not meant to take her seriously; she is presented only to dislike and to entertain. She is also the answer to kind requests for a happy ending. I hope she amuses you.

*Yours,
Noel.*

October, 1935.

Part I

CHAPTER I

EVEN considered as the result of a confinement, Flossie Elk was remarkable.

Her succeeding in being born at all, 'seeing,' as the neighbours said, 'how things were,' was so awe-inspiring, that for more than a year she was—until superseded by Mrs. Lewis's Ben, who was run over by a lorry, 'and never a mark on him'—merely the local proof of divine intervention in emergencies. 'While there's life, there's 'ope. Look at Mrs. Elk's Flossie.'

Even to Mrs. Elk, proud though she was of her first and, by the doctor's orders, only baby, Flossie, for the first thirteen months of her existence, was more an achievement against hopeless odds, than a personality. Then Mrs. Elk had occasion to re-visit the hospital in which the achievement had taken place, for what she described as 'feeling all of a drop, and while she was seeing the doctor, a nurse took Flossie. When, later, Mrs. Elk emerged triumphant, complete with minor scaffoldings, the doctor came with her to the door and saw the baby. He picked her up off the nurse's lap.

"Good God!" he said. "This can't be that baby." For the struggle that had produced Flossie was

still a nightmare memory.

Mrs. Elk nodded, and then sighed heavily to indicate God's mercies.

"It's wonderful we're both here."

The Doctor glanced across at Mrs. Elk's meagre figure, sandy straggling hair, and featureless grey-toned face, and then looked at the golden-haired, blue-eyed perfection of Flossie.

"It's a miracle she's here. Why, the child's a beauty." He tossed Flossie up in the air, she gurgled appreciatively. "Go on looking like that, Miss, and you'll set the Thames on fire."

Going home in the tram Mrs. Elk, for the first time, studied Flossie purely as Flossie, and quite apart from the difficulty of her arrival, and the scales fell from her eyes.

Mr. Elk was a greengrocer, not in a big way, but what he called 'a tidy little business.' He was a greengrocer not from accident, but from conviction. As a boy he had been put to work for a milkman, and his round had taken him through Covent Garden, and the sight of the market had stirred ambition in him, 'one day he'd live in the country, and grow green stuff like that, and send it up to London in carts.' After finishing as milk-boy, he had packed for a stores, and from that had risen to driving a van. During the van period a fellow-driver sold him a ticket in the stores sweep on the Derby, and he won sixty pounds. The years had

dimmed his vision of the country, but the vegetables were still there, and so, with his sixty pounds, he bought the premises and good-will of a little bankrupt greengrocery business in the Fordham Road, London, S.E. Some men have a vocation for one thing, some for another, Mr. Elk's was for the buying and selling of vegetables. On the whole, shoppers are people of sense, and it was not long before the ladies of the district learnt that 'Elk's' in the Fordham Road had really good stuff at no more than you'd pay for it anywhere else. So Mr. Elk prospered. He was just beginning to prosper when he met Fanny Stubbs. Fanny had not long left school, and though she stood all day in the wet, working in a tea factory, she looked none the worse, and was, in a sandy way, almost pretty. Mr. Elk thought her a miracle of beauty, and Fanny thought him a bit of all right, and the greengrocer shop a treat. So about a year after first meeting, they were married. They had been married eight years when they achieved Flossie.

Arrived home from the hospital, Mrs. Elk put Flossie into her pram, and went into the shop. Mr. Elk was shifting brussels sprouts from one basket to another. Mrs. Elk leant against a sack of potatoes.

"George, have you ever 'ad a good look at our Flossie?" Her voice was heavy with unspoken things.

Mr. Elk paused with both hands full of sprouts.

"Why, what's up? She's all right, ain't she?"

"All right!" Mrs. Elk laughed meaningly; a laugh calculated to make any father feel a fool. "You never looked at her, I suppose? She's only going to be a great beauty, that's all."

Mr. Elk was a regular attendant at the service of the mission house on the corner of the Fordham Road. Its religious views were indefinite, a warm odorous fug, combined with the more sentimental of the hymns induced a slight emotionalism easily mistaken for repentance. When this feeling was at its height, the minister, whose chief gift was an admirable sense of timing, would preach, brainlessly, but with fervour, of sin. Mr. Elk, slightly glazed by the heat, and the hymns, would lie back in his chair and allow fragments of what he heard to lodge in his mind. One of those fragments, repeated so often that it could scarcely avoid lodging, was the danger of beauty.

"Don't talk so silly, Fanny," he said, continuing the house-removal of the brussels sprouts. "Don't you listen to what's said of a Sunday? Beauty is a lure of Satan." He dropped the last sprout into its basket. "If our Floss grows up a good sensible girl as'll make a nice wife for some man that's all we ask 'eaven for."

Mrs. Elk read serials in the papers, and knew the astounding power wielded by the beautiful. The possession of beauty might not make for goodness,

and sensibleness, in the sense that Mr. Elk and the minister meant, but it did make for a life very much more exciting than that led by Fanny Elk in the Fordham Road.

"Oh well, we shall see what we shall see," was all she said to Mr. Elk, but to Flossie, as she picked her out of the pram, she murmured fiercely, "If you 'ave the looks, you use 'em, my girl."

Flossie gurgled.

CHAPTER II

VISIONS, or at least clear undimmed ones, are for those with time to spend viewing them, and minds, unclogged with other matters, to give to them. Fanny had neither time nor an unclouded mind. Her hours were spent in a harassed futile effort to keep pace with the days' chores, and her mind was mostly focused on her inside which had an increasing tendency to go 'all of a drop.' So from inanition her visions for her daughter gradually faded. There were, of course, moments when they revived, such as when Flossie came pink and gurgling out of her bath, or when she sat up in her cot in a clean nightdress looking more like a child angel than a human baby. At such times Fanny would feel as though somebody had taken her heart in his hand and given it a quick squeeze, and she would snatch Flossie up murmuring proud nothings. These occasions were rare: mostly Flossie was not looking like one to whom visions and proud nothings belong. She started the day clean, and finished it clean, but in the intervening hours she was as black as any baby would be, whose freedom is only bounded by the distance it can crawl, or toddle.

George, aware of Fanny's dropped inside (as how should he not be, seeing it was a major subject of conversation both at table and in bed), did what he could to help. "Give us young Floss, she'll be all right along of me." He would pick the baby out of her high chair, the tray of which she was beating with a spoon, and carry her into the shop, and put her down on the floor. The floor of the shop, if not a hygienic nursery, was certainly an entrancing one, scattered as it was with bits of fruit and vegetables. Had Flossie not possessed an inside with unusual powers of resistance, she must have died from the over-ripe, dirty uncooked bits that she swallowed before her fifth birthday. Between customers, George did what he could to keep an eye on her. "Put that down! Dirty girl! Bad baby!" Very early Flossie learnt her first lesson in the art of handling men. For a little while she screamed when anything was taken out of her mouth. Then one day, George snatched a particular toothsome bit of over-ripe plum from her. The sun was shining warmly, a barrel-organ playing down the street, and the piece of plum a real find. For Flossie the moment was utterly golden, then suddenly, with the loss of her treasure, the radiance was gone. For once she did not scream, the transition from joy to grief was too abrupt; instead, she raised her blue eyes in hurt wonder that she could be so treated, and fixed them on her father, while they slowly flooded

with tears. George was shocked at himself. One glance at those eyes, and he knew he was a bully and a cad. He still had the piece of plum in his hand, he looked down at it, but though conscience-stricken, he could not persuade himself it was fit to eat. Then he looked at Flossie, flung the plum into the gutter, picked her up, and carried her into the sweetshop next door, apologising for being a cruel Dad. This event repeated, soon sank into Flossie's consciousness.

When Flossie reached her fifth birthday, she went to school. It was a cold day early in January. Fanny buttoned her into her little red coat, and pulled on her cap.

"Dad," she called, "come and give a kiss to Floss, we're just off."

'Fordham Road Infants' was at the far end of the Fordham Road. With her head down to shield her face from the wind, Fanny, acutely conscious of her dropped inside, led Flossie up the street. She thought thankfully that as there were no crossings, and a lot of other children going, that soon Flossie could make her journeys to and fro alone. Flossie skipped, because her legs were not long, and it was a nice way to get about. She made a little song in her head on the word 'school.'

In the hall of the 'Fordham Road Infants' they waited with the other mothers and new children. The mothers were younger than Fanny, because

they had not waited eight years before having a baby; the new children, who were the tail-ends of a family, had not got mothers with them, they were merely pushed in at the door by an elder brother or sister.

Miss Green, the head teacher, taught because she liked children. She taught infants because she preferred children when they were little. Up to the age of seven she considered that all children, even the very dirty ones, had charm. Her fondness for children made her try to believe that all children always had charm. Sometimes, when she met Miss Elder's 'girls' or Mr. Hale's 'boys' on the stairs, she faltered in this view. Difficult to ignore a lack of washing when in bulk. She wondered whether children were more washed before they were seven, or whether after that as the size of the unwashed grew, so did the odour.

Flossie was looking at the floor when Miss Green first saw her. She had found a crack which had a hairpin in it, she tried to get the hairpin out with the toe of her shoe. Bent as she was, the back of a red coat, a cap of the same colour with some almost white curls clinging to it, and the crease at the back of a tiny neck, were all that were visible.

"This is Floss," said Fanny. "Stand up, Floss, do, and say good morning to the teacher."

Flossie raised her head regretfully from the hairpin. Miss Green stared at her.

"Oh!" she gasped. "Oh!"

One did not of course say in front of children, even very small ones, how lovely you thought they were, but she could not help an exclamation. The face looking at her was no ordinary pretty little face. There was such width between the eyes. Such eyes! A startling blue, and the lashes long and black. Then the nose, snubby though it still was, had a skin that seemed translucent. She took off Flossie's cap, and stared at the breadth of forehead, and the moonlight-silver curls that tumbled out. She looked up at Fanny, puzzled.

"Is this your daughter?" She tried to keep a frankly unbelieving tone out of her voice.

"That's right. Her name's Flora, but me and her dad call her Flossie."

Miss Green's hand stole out, she could not keep herself from stroking those curls.

"Is her father very fair?" Perhaps here was the answer, there must be one to such a miracle.

"No, much my colour." Fanny kissed Flossie. "Be a good girl now and do what teacher says, and Mum'll be back for you dinner-time."

Flossie did not in the least mind being left with Miss Green. But she had noticed that as the other mothers had disappeared, the children had howled. The howls had produced no effect beyond a "Give over, Freddie, do," or "I'll call a policeman," from the departing parent, and a hurried handing over

of the child to a lesser teacher, by Miss Green. Nevertheless, Flossie felt howling was the right thing to do. The result was not what the treatment of the others had led her to expect. Certainly her mother turned back with "Oh, for Gawd's sake, Floss," but Miss Green instead of handing her to somebody else turned eagerly to Fanny.

"Poor little mite. Don't you worry, Mrs. Elk, I'll soon cheer her up." She led Flossie to her own room, and cheered her with a chocolate, and wiped away her tears, and gave her curls yet another stroke. "You're going to be so, so happy at school," she cooed.

She was quite right: Flossie was. Her career through the 'Fordham Road Infants' was not marred by a cross word. It was, in fact, a career of praise and pats. She discovered in her first fortnight that a slightly anxious frown on being asked a question, brought a horrified "Oh, Flossie, don't wrinkle your forehead—now think." Flossie had no need to think: the teacher, in her anxiety to keep frowns off that perfect face, was forming the answer with her lips.

Flossie, deprived of the leavings on the shop floor, found a method of getting other dainties. Little boys she learnt were generous. Scarcely a couple of sweets found their way into the school in the pockets of the small boys but Floss got one of them. The

little girls too seldom owned anything good to eat, but Flossie got a share. She would see the apple, or the piece of chocolate, and a smile getting only a frown from the owner, she would move over to a teacher, and allowing her eyes to flood with tears would look up at her. The result was always the same: questions, Flossie's whispered story that she had been promised a bit of the sweet or apple, an indignant sweeping down on the other child, and, always provided there was any left, her reward.

When Christmas came round, and the treat for the children was discussed in the teachers' room, they were faced with the annual problem: Who was to have the fairy doll off the top of the tree? Miss Green hesitated only a moment and then said:

"It's not favouritism, but I do think little Flossie Elk should have it, she has such a sad poor home."

Flossie being one of the best dressed children in the school, the other teachers were amazed, but they all agreed that Flossie should have the doll.

On the day of the treat, the school benefactress who had given the fairy doll saw Flossie receive it.

"Comes from such a sad poor home," whispered one of the school managers, who had heard it from Miss Green.

"Really." They both looked at Flossie, and thought of adoption.

The other little girls had watched the bestowal of the fairy doll with fortitude. They knew when they were beaten.

Miss Green called on Miss Elder. She had her list of the children who were moving up. She made a few remarks about them, and then her finger came to rest on Flossie.

"A dear little thing," she sighed, for in giving Flossie to Miss Elder she felt rather like a Christian mother handing its only child to a lion. "Comes from such a sad poor home."

Miss Elder looked at the address.

"Fordham Road," she said briskly. "Eighty-one. That's the other end of this street. Nice little houses. Elk? That's the greengrocer, got a nice business, pass the place every day. Why is the home poor and sad?"

"I don't know," Miss Green said feebly, "but it is, everybody says so."

Flossie came up into the big school the next morning. It was the half-term. Miss Elder assembled all the girls in the hall, and gave them a short address. She spoke to them of the value of education, on the need for forming character, on acquiring a high ideal while at school, and trying to live up to it ever afterwards. Flossie listened for a moment, thought it all very dull, yawned, fidgeted, and turned round to look at the rest of the school.

Then she made a discovery which shook her, there were no boys. The faces staring up at Miss Elder were all female. She ought to have known, for weeks now she had heard that she was moving up into 'The Girls' but somehow what it meant had never penetrated her consciousness. She was recalled from her gloomy thoughts on a boyless world by Miss Elder's voice.

"Little girl in blue in the front row."

Her next-door neighbour gave her a nudge. Flossie was startled.

"What's your name?"

"Flossie Elk."

The whisper was so minute that no one heard it.

"Come here. I can't hear you."

Flossie came gingerly forward. Her head hung down.

"Now. What's your name?"

"Flossie Elk."

"Oh." Miss Elder looked at the face, and moon-coloured hair, and the neat little blue frock, and the well-fed body. 'Comes from such a sad poor home.' She recalled Miss Green's sugary tone as she said it. "Sentimental fool," she thought, "ought to be too used to children to be carried away by prettiness." Flossie, puzzled by the pause, cautiously raised her enormous lashes and peered up at Miss Elder through them.

Miss Elder had a face like a horse, long and

narrow, with a good deal of it given up to jaw. Her skin was red, and tight, her hair a wispy yellow, she was short-sighted, so pince-nez were clipped to the end of her nose, and to insure that good money should not be thrown away on repairing glasses, were also attached to her bosom by a fine gold chain. She had never possessed even the transitory prettiness of the small child, her face in middle age was as easy to look at as at any other period of her life. In self-defence she lived by a slogan 'Beauty-is-the-cause-of-much-sorrow.' 'Oh-the-sorrow-I-have-seen-caused-by-a-pretty-face!' She had never seen anything of the sort, but since she had her needs and longings like the rest of the world, she found a slogan a preventive against soaking the pillow with futile, idiotic tears.

Even as Flossie peered up at her, so Miss Elder gazed down at Flossie, and found herself looking for the first time in her life at real, incontestable beauty, and in that moment her salvationist's spirit swelled. Beauty could not be cured like a nasty habit, or a tendency to steal; but it was possible to see that a face like that was not let loose upon the world without its owner being aware of the danger of what she possessed.

"Wait here," she said severely. "I will speak to you when I have dismissed the other girls."

She took Flossie to her room. It was so like Miss Green's room, even to its furnishings that Flossie

looked hopefully at the drawer in which chocolates should live.

"My child," Miss Elder paused effectively, "I have brought you in here for a little talk. You did not listen to a word of my address this morning. That was doubly wrong, first because it was bad-mannered — 'A-child-always-listens-when-a-grown-up-is-speaking,' and secondly because what I was saying was of particular value to you. Tell me, of what were you thinking, that was so much more important than my remarks?"

Flossie was so scared by the tone of voice used for this homily, a tone for which life in the infant school had not prepared her, that she took refuge in the only defence she knew. Her eyes filled, and she raised them to Miss Elder.

Miss Elder had a stiff fight with herself. She could not look into those eyes, tear-filled by her harsh words, and not feel a brute. But her common sense pulled her together, and showed her in a flash how right her slogan had always been. "What a danger," she thought. "Why, even I was weakening."

"Flossie," her voice was sterner than ever, "of what were you thinking? When I ask a question I expect an answer."

Flossie's brain went round like a Catherine wheel. Of what had she been thinking? She was doing what she always did, letting thoughts run in and out of her head, none of them stayed long enough to

remember. Her new blue frock recalled that she had moved up into 'The Girl's.' Suddenly a light came into her face, she had remembered, all would now be well.

"I was thinkin' that there weren't no boys in this school."

Miss Elder looked puzzled. What a curious answer.

"Naturally not. This is a girls' school. You know that?"

"Yes." Flossie looked down, a reminiscent smile at the thought of many sweets just curving the ends of her lips. "But I likes boys."

Miss Elder, conscious of peering eyes behind curtains, walked into the shop. George was arranging apples, a polished pile, red cheeks to the window. He laid down the one he held, wiped his hands on his apron, and came forward with a questioning 'Good afternoon.' Miss Elder looked at the window, and at random ordered six oranges.

"Seven that is," George corrected her, wrapping them up. "Seven for sixpence they are."

"Quite." She watched him swing the bag round till its corners formed two brown ears, and knew that in a moment, from his point of view, she should be gone. She gave a slight unnecessary cough. "I am Flossie's head teacher."

"Indeed, ma'am." He handed her the fruit. "Any-

thing more I can serve you with to-day?"

"No." She did not take the bag. "I am so glad to have this chance of a word with you, Mr. Elk. I pass this way twice every day, and I so much admire your fruit."

George looked disparagingly at the window.

"Don't look so well just now. Just winter greens, though the apples and oranges make a nice bit'ter colour. But you ought to see it in May, ma'am, and June, that's the time." He nudged her with the paper bag. "You ever been ter Covent Garden when the stuff's coming in?" She shook her head. "You should, it's a picture. Peas, beans, tomatoes, lettuces, watercress, radishes, the 'ole bloomin' shoot, put a name to anything an' you can have it. And the fruit!" His voice trailed away, hushed by the glory of strawberries and raspberries seen in the mind's eye.

It is pleasant in winter to be warmed by summer's magnificence. It made Miss Elder forget her chilblains.

"And the flowers too, I hear they are wonderful."

"Oh them." With a gesture George dismissed all flowers to a limbo for the unedible.

The conversation was obviously finished as far as he was concerned. Desperately she looked for a new opening. "Curious," she thought, "how omnipotent one felt with parents who came to the school, and how awkward and tongue-tied when one met them outside." George politely held out the

bag. To take it she felt was the equivalent to shutting the door; she must not let that happen, so undignified to set out on a mission, and instead, achieve seven oranges. She firmly pushed the bag back at George. "One moment, Mr. Elk, I want to see you, and to-day needing oranges—. I do think teachers and parents should work together for the good of the children, don't you?"

George looked at his pile of apples—time he was getting back to them, he thought.

"Ah, it's Mrs. Elk you're wantin'. She's only stepped up the road, be back any minute." He wondered what the teacher needed, a confused jumble of requirements, school tunics, pencil boxes, a violin, formed in his mind. "Something you was wantin' for our Floss? Anythin' she needs that I can manage she can have."

'Comes from such a sad poor home.' Miss Elder's back stiffened at the ludicrousness of the description.

"No," she said firmly. "It is not her bodily needs I am anxious about, Mr. Elk. It's her spiritual ones. 'Beauty-is-the-cause-of-much-sorrow,' you know."

George was surprised at the turn the conversation had taken, but at least it was a subject with which he felt at home.

"It's a lure of Satan," he agreed.

Miss Elder felt this to be a little strong. She managed an uneasy laugh.

"Well, I wouldn't speak of Flossie's face quite like that."

George stared at her.

"'Oo's speakin' of Floss?"

Miss Elder saw her road clear at last.

"I was, Mr. Elk. You have a remarkably beautiful child."

"Now look 'ere." George tapped her arm with his finger. "I do hope you won't go sayin' nothin' of that kind to Mrs. Elk. She talked about Floss very silly for a time, very silly, but she's forgotten all about it now, and there ain't nothin' gained by rakin' it up."

"Oh, but I——"

"I'm not blamin' you, ma'am, ladies gets silly ideas, but I'll tell you now, what I told her then, all I want for my Floss is that she grows up a nice sensible girl as'll make a good wife for some man. A face is given us from on 'igh ter see with, smell with, eat with, and hear with, and makin' a show of it is goin' beyond what's intended."

Fanny came in by the side door, she left Flossie swinging on the gate. She went into the kitchen to put on the kettle, the door was open, and across the passage she heard George's last words. She put down the kettle, and crept over and peeped through the shop door. Miss Elder was just taking her oranges. She felt she had been put in her place, she never allowed the children's parents to put her

in her place, so her voice became both frozen and condescending.

"Good-bye. I see we are in complete agreement. If I should—" Her pause on the word showed the improbability of such a contingency, "need any help, I shall come and see you again."

George looked after her with a puzzled frown. "Queer woman," he thought, and went back to his apples.

Fanny came in, she crossed to the shop exit, and looked after Miss Elder.

"That's the teacher from the school."

George rubbed an apple.

"That's right."

"What's she want?"

"Oranges."

"But I heard you talkin', carryin' on shockin' you was. What was you talking about?"

"Faces." He rubbed fiercely. "I told her and I tell you, all I want for our Floss is to grow up a good woman."

"Oh." Fanny went back to the kitchen, she picked up the kettle but instead of filling it, she carried it with her to the window, and put it on the ledge, leant on it, and stared out over it, through the grimy glass at Flossie, swinging on the rusty, iron gate. She stared at her until she became nothing but a blurr of scarlet and pink and gold, and with her went the Fordham Road and its mean

little houses, years of toil done regardless of pain, shabby clothes, and worn furniture, and in their place were things seen in the theatre, read of in books and papers, and half imagined and dreamt. A world where houses were not cramped, and where rooms were large, and so built that neighbours could not hear each other, a world where other people did your work for you, where there were lovely clothes, even the underclothes beautiful, the world of motor-cars, scents, a world unimaginable, seen dimly, like a shape in smoke."

"Fanny. Fanny. What about a cup of tea?"

With a start she was back in the kitchen.

"Comin', George." Mechanically she filled the kettle.

CHAPTER III

FLOSSIE had measles. She was no worse with it than the average child, but she made a great fuss, and her howls of misery and boredom from her darkened bedroom drove Fanny nearly distracted with worry, and caused George to go to the unheard-of extravagance of bringing her, from the market, large purple grapes. When she was finally allowed out of bed, things were not much better; she felt, and looked, a misery; dull hair, blotchy face, and tears over everything. The doctor said that she should get out, that the fresh air would soon put her right. Fresh air may be a panacea, but it did not look an attractive cure in the Fordham Road at the end of March. The gardens, to glorify the plots of earth in front of each house, were at best, noticeable for neatness, and at worst, for cats and broken bottles. They were discouraging bits of ground surrounded by iron palings, damp and dark, though in one or two there was a clump of irises, or a patch of London pride. The Elks had a rose-tree. George had planted it; it was not a success as the ground was stony for roses, but he grew it as the next best thing to vegetables. The usual way of using the ground was to plant an euonymus, or leave the euonymus

standing that was there already. No one in the street grew bulbs, there were no snowdrops and crocuses to soften the bleakness of January and February, no daffodils or hyacinths, still less a prunus, as tokens, however bleak the March weather, that winter was over.

"Now, Floss, put your things on and go out and have a nice play," Fanny said, looking hopefully at the street up which the wind was driving a flotsam of torn papers. "The doctor says it'll do you good."

Flossie looked out of the window.

"Don't want'er go out."

"Now you be a good girl, 't isn't what you want, it's what's right for you." Fanny pushed the child through the door and slammed it.

George, looking out over his array of oranges and apples, saw Flossie, with tears pouring down her cheeks, walk aimlessly up the street. He watched her dragging feet, and hunched shoulders, and came to a decision which startled himself. There were no customers in sight, so he went in search of Fanny and found her making their bed.

"Fan, our Floss needs a bit'er sea."

"Seal" Fanny looked at him stupidly over the quilt she was holding.

"That's right, sea. I bin thinkin' I could manage a fortnight for you both, and maybe come down at the week-end meself. What do you say to Brighton?"

Fanny dropped the quilt and flushed slowly. Before the advent of Flossie they had been to Southend for a week every August. But Brighton!

"Well, I must say it will be a treat. Brighton too, so classy."

Flossie found Brighton entrancing. Fanny bought her a spade and pail, and while she sat in a shelter out of the wind, listening to the band, left her to dig on the beach. She was happy at first making her own lop-sided mounds, then that palled, and she hung about, talking to, or watching the other children dig.

One morning, running down to a pool to fill her pail, she found three small boys constructing an edifice which was as different from her effort as Buckingham Palace to the homes in the Fordham Road. She put down her pail, and watched the builders. The smallest boy turned and saw her.

"This is a prison," he said, "where they keep bad men."

The tallest boy did not stop his furious digging, but spoke while he worked.

"Shut up, Gerald." He looked at Flossie, and added politely: "He is so silly, this isn't a prison, it's a castle."

"And a 'normous ogre lives in it," Gerald piped up, refusing to be snubbed.

"Don't be so silly, Gerald," the third boy broke

in. "Ogres don't live in castles. Kings do."

The tallest boy stopped digging for a second and looked shyly at Flossie.

"Like to help?"

She nodded, and took her place in the ring round the castle, and dug up a minute portion of sand, then paused to watch the three energetic spades beside her. At once she spotted that hers was by far the smallest spade, and that the eldest boy's was a most grown-up affair of tin, which shifted sand at unbelievable speed. She straightened her back and nudged him with her elbow.

"I could dig much better if I had a spade like that."

He looked at her, and felt a quite inexplicable wish to please. He held out his spade.

"You can try if you like." Flossie said nothing, but took the spade, and began to dig. He watched her. "Tell you what, you can keep it if you like, I like digging better with wooden ones."

His two brothers stopped working, the second boy stuttered, he was so shocked.

"Oh, John, Daddy will be angry, he's only just given it to you."

Gerald looked hurt.

"You wouldn't even lend it me to try, and now you've given it to her."

Flossie might have been deaf, she went on digging, paying no attention to the argument, and

when Fanny called her to go home, she picked up her pail and went off without a word, carrying the spade, and never even gave John a smile.

Fanny was determined that this opportunity to see a town like Brighton should not be missed.

"It's a wicked waste, Flossie, to be hanging about all the time on that beach, when there's that beautiful Dome to see and the shops and all."

With the coming of May, the weather turned warm, and one day Fanny got out Flossie's white frock and bought her a straw hat trimmed with daisies, and though she still had to wear her winter coat, the landlady beamed when she saw her, and said she looked a perfect picture.

Fanny looked at herself and Flossie in the long glass on the wardrobe, and thought: "My skirt may not be so tight as some, and it hasn't got that split they're all wearing, but with the way my inside drops, it makes me stick out a bit in front, and too tight a skirt wouldn't look quite nice, but nobody can't say my new costume isn't tony. I'm glad to get it on; it would have been a disappointment if it had stayed too cold. Really, looking at us both, we might be anyone and that's a fact."

Looking as she knew they looked, there could be, in Fanny's opinion, only one road suited to them, and that was the Western Road. It was her favourite walk at any time, the shops were so smart,

and so up to date, so unlike anything they had at home, and to-day looking at them had an added pleasure.

"There! See that costume, Flossie, it's got just the cut of these sleeves. Oh, look there, Floss! There's a coat with just my waistline."

Flossie, bored, dragged along behind her, until her attention was caught by a photographer's window, filled with portraits of children. Fanny would have hurried by, but the photographer happened to be in his doorway, he gave a quick look at Flossie, and then smiled at Fanny.

"Won't you and the little girl step inside, madam, and inspect the photographs?"

Fanny twittered with pleasure, she had been right; dressed as they were, they might be anybody, even the sort of people who had expensive photographs taken in the Western Road.

"Pleased, I'm sure." She took Flossie's hand. "Come along, dear."

In a very short time Flossie was bored with the photographs, and wandered round the room, and finally stood in the sunlight in the doorway, staring at the people and traffic. The photographer waited until she moved away, and then drew up a chair facing Fanny.

"Have you seen about the competition for Britain's most beautiful child, being run in the *Sunday World*?" Fanny shook her head. "That's

what all these pictures of children are for. I've always had a knack taking children. Seeing your little girl looking at my window, it came over me like a flash, 'There's a little beauty. What a picture she'd make.' "

"A competition in a paper!" Fanny wriggled on her chair. "Oh, her dad would never hear of her goin' in for a thing like that. Very particular her dad is. Religious-minded, you might say."

"A pity." The photographer pursed up his lips. "Mind you, it's not like one of these beauty competitions. Oh no, I'd never suggest a thing like that. This is more in the high art line." He paused and then added casually, "Nice prizes there are, a hundred pounds for the first place, fifty the second, and twenty-five the third."

Fanny looked at the photographer, and then they both looked at Flossie standing in the sunlight.

"What a picture!" he breathed.

"Come here, Floss," Fanny said sharply, "and let me give your hair a comb, the gentleman's goin' to take your picture."

The photographs were ready for them to see on the Friday before they went home.

"And mind you, Floss," said Fanny, pausing outside the photographer's, "you're not to tell your dad, when he comes to fetch us to-morrow, anything about having your picture took."

"Why not?"

"'Cause I say 'No,' miss, and that's quite enough for you."

The photographer was waiting for them. He picked up the packet of proofs as though they were too fine for his coarse hands to touch, and reverently, breathing heavily through his nose, he laid them out one by one. He never looked at Fanny, nor spoke a word until they were all in place, then he picked up a three-quarter face in which Flossie was looking soulfully at the stars.

"I never thought, Mrs. Elk," he said solemnly, "to take what you might call a perfect picture. I had my limitations, I thought, but now," he held out the photograph, "I think I may say, without flattering myself, that here is a work of art."

Fanny peered at the picture, it was very good of Flossie, she thought.

"Oh, it is good." She stopped, and then something made her feel she had not praised sufficiently. "Sweetly pretty," she added.

The photographer looked at the way the light showed up the modelling of the features, and at the beauty of the forehead.

"It's more than pretty." He had a flash of imagination. "I shouldn't wonder if this wouldn't be famous. There's a line somewhere I heard as a boy, 'This is a face that wrecked a thousand ships,' or something like that."

"Wrecked ships?" said Fanny, puzzled. She felt out of her depth and took her usual refuge behind George. "Oh, we shall 'ave to see about that: my 'usband wouldn't like to 'ave her talked of that way, I'm sure."

Flossie had listened to the conversation, it had been pleasant to hear while it was all flattery, but now it had gone beyond her. She looked at the photographer out of the corner of her eye, it seemed stupid that so much admiration should not yield some material result. She gave a tug to his coat and looked up at him with the wistful star-gazing expression that he had caught with such success.

"Other children on the front ride on donkeys."

He looked down at her, and was hurt almost, to see her flesh-and-blood face looking up at him. Admiring his own handiwork, he had practically come to feel he had created the lovely thing he had produced on cardboard, he had put anyone else's share of the business to the back of his mind. But now the artist in him came to the front, and he felt his heart swell with gratitude to heaven, not only for making such a masterpiece, but having made it, for seeing that it came to his door in the Western Road. Suddenly he realised that Flossie had said something.

"What is it, my dear?"

"I said that on the front other children ride on donkeys."

He smiled, caught back in a memory of sand prickling his skin, and the jog-jog shaking his inside, and leather reins with bells on them, red reins.

"Is there still a donkey with red reins?"

Flossie nodded.

"One there is, and the goat cart has blue ones."

He felt in his pocket for a shilling, and then changed it to half a crown. A shilling seemed a poor offering to this gift from heaven.

"Well," said George, helping the liver and bacon, "what do you both want to do for your last afternoon?" Fanny looked at him eagerly.

"I thought maybe you'd take us to the concert party, there's a very classy one here, much better than they are in August, she says," she jerked her head to indicate the landlady. "I've been wantin' to go ever so, but I hadn't the money, I had to get young Floss a new hat."

"Well, I call that silly," George protested, "sittin' inside a stuffy concert hall with the sun shining and all, and, what's more, it's a waste of money."

"Dad," Flossie leant to her father with an ingratiating smile, "could we go to the Aquarium? All the other children on the beach go."

George glowed looking at her, it was wonderful what the air had done for her, he thought.

"Well, that's an idea," he agreed.

"But it costs money too," Fanny protested. She

turned to Flossie: "If you wanted to go to the Aquarium why on earth couldn't you have gone this morning when we were down that way?"

"Don't talk so silly, Fanny," George interposed mildly. "How could the kid go to the Aquarium without having any money?"

"But——" Fanny broke off just in time, remembering George must not know that Flossie owned half a crown, all but sixpence which had gone on a donkey ride. "Oh well," she sighed, "why you two want to spend all your afternoon looking at a lot of fish beats me, but maybe I'll find it more interesting when I get there."

"Like that, Floss?" George asked.

Flossie nodded to her father, and gave her mother a smug smile.

CHAPTER IV

THE competition results were to be announced at the beginning of August in a special holiday edition. Fanny lay awake at night torn by the conflicting emotions of excitement should Flossie win the prize, and fright at what George would say if she did. The Elks did not take the *Sunday World*, but Fanny had managed to look at copies left over at the stationer's on Monday mornings, and had seen whole pages of photographs of the entrants in the 'Britain's most beautiful child' competition. Flossie's was not among them, but one day it might be. Sundays found Fanny as jumpy as a grasshopper, quivering for the sound of a knock which would mean a neighbour excitedly clutching a copy of the *Sunday World*.

All her heart-burnings were for nothing. Flossie's photograph never was published among the entrants, or if it was, none of the neighbours recognised it, and before the prize-winners could be announced, war had been declared.

The war worried George. His feelings on the subject took him unawares. During the trouble in South Africa he had not felt the same way at all. His view of the present conflict was the result of a

casual encounter with a man who came in to buy some potatoes. He had shown him some post cards of Belgium. During the last war George had seen masses of pictures of South Africa, flat, sandy land with things called kopjes sticking up on it, not the sort of place he could imagine people living on, and so just the sort of place to fight a war. But this Belgium! The man had been on a walking tour there, and his post cards had pictures of ordinary towns with trams and houses with bits of gardens. There was one picture of Ghent that showed a turning very like the one that led out of the High Street into the Fordham Road.

"That's how it looked," said the man grimly, "till these Germans got there."

George thought a lot about this, it seemed wrong to fight a war where there were ordinary streets and houses, and tram-cars about.

Fanny's view of the war was that it was an ill wind that blew nobody any good, for maybe it would distract George's mind if Flossie did win the 'Britain's most beautiful child' competition.

Oddly enough George never did know that Flossie had entered the competition and won. Fanny heard the result by the Saturday morning post, but she managed to keep the letter out of sight, and though there was a large reproduction of the photograph the next day in the *Sunday World* he never saw it, for when a neighbour ran round with the paper,

he had gone down the High Street to discuss the war with a friend. If any of the congregation at the mission house had seen the paper, they were too shocked to say anything; privately Fanny suspected that they had, for out of the corner of her eye she caught the family receiving, what she named to herself as, 'some very old-fashioned looks.'

The cheque for the hundred pounds arrived the next week. It had been their original idea, the proprietors wrote, to have had a public presentation, but naturally, the moment war had been declared, they had decided that this was not the time for such things.

Fanny opened the letter in the kitchen and frowned at the cheque. Later in the day, when George had taken Flossie to Victoria Station to see some troops off to France, she got the bottle of ink and the pen from the desk in the corner of the shop, and wrote the first letter she had written since she had been married.

Dear Sir,

I am very pleased Floss has the prize hoping you are the same but I cannot do anything with it on account of it being just paper and Mister Elk being the only one who knows how to do with it and him not knowing how Floss as won.

Yours truly Mrs. Elk.

The photographer had a son, in the Territorials,

just off to France, but he found time to write back explaining about endorsement, and later sent her the result in five-pound notes. If he had not been so engrossed with his own child he would have added some suggestions as to the future of the money. Himself, he spent the photographer's prize of fifty pounds on giving his boy a wrist watch, and a good time, and there was none of it left when he stood on the platform at Victoria staring at the back of a receding train. Later, he framed Flossie's photograph, and hung it in his office where ordinary eyes would not see it. It was to him what the portrait of a saint might be to another. He would have been unlikely to have spent fifty pounds out of his income, with the war on, and now it was a help to think the boy had everything he wanted, just that once, for he never got back to ask for any more.

Fanny put Flossie's hundred pounds in an old glove, and took a broken dinner knife, and prized up one of the bricks round the kitchen stove, and buried the glove under it, and every day, as soon as the house was empty, took a look, to be sure the money was safe.

George joined the Army not so much from conviction that it was his duty, as because he was emotionally carried away. On a Wednesday morning he woke up a greengrocer, with no thought of being anything else. On Wednesday evening he

went to bed a private in the East Surreys. Being early closing he had taken the opportunity of his freedom to walk down the High Street to hear any news that might be about. A rag-tag of recruits in miscellaneous uniforms were marching to a training camp. George watched them proudly, glad to think that young men were flocking to the support of the old country, but with no thought of joining in that support. Then a voice said in his ear, "How about you, mate? There's more wanted." The sergeant made George jump, he had not realised he was standing with his back to a recruiting office.

"Well, I 'ave me shop," he explained.

"These Belgians had shops once," said the sergeant.

That did it. In George went, dropped eight years off his age, and came out with the King's shilling.

He came into the kitchen and looked sheepishly at Fanny.

"I've joined up."

Fanny drew her head and shoulders out of the oven, and gaped at him.

"You never! Whatever for?"

George pondered her question, but could see no answer to it, so he left it.

"They'll give you and Floss some money." He jerked his head towards his shop. "Do you think you could manage the customers? I'll fix up about the buyin' of the stuff."

"How?"

"Mr. Smith down the 'igh Street, 'e'll see to me when he buys for hisself." A thought struck him, it made him straighten his shoulders. "So he should too, me serving me country."

Fanny looked at him with affectionate amusement.

"Old funny, aren't you?"

Flossie came in from school.

"Wipe your feet, do," said Fanny mechanically, "and the floor's not the place for your 'at, what d'you think pegs are for? Your Dad's enlisted."

Flossie swung her hat round by its elastic.

"So he should too, most of the fathers of the girls in my class have done that."

Fanny had another look at her cake in the oven.

"All right, Miss Saucy, go and hang up that hat before the elastic's a bit 'ter string; tea's ready."

George sat down at the table, he looked in a worried way at Fanny's back. She'd be sure to make a mess of running the shop, he didn't like to ask her to do it with her inside dropping the way it did. Fanny put the pot on the table, and poured him out a cup of tea. He put three lumps of sugar into it, and stirred.

"You see how it was, Fanny?"

She looked at him and giggled.

"You, a soldier!"

* * *

The hundred pounds worried Fanny. With George away it seemed hardly safe having all that money in the house. Flossie knew about it, she did not know about it being under a brick, but she knew she had won it, and sometimes asked if she could not have some of it to spend. Fanny lived in terror that somehow the child would discover where it was hidden, and gossip about it outside. She lay awake at night, trembling at every creak. Easy for a thief to sneak in.

Flossie had, of course, learnt that she had won the 'Britain's most beautiful child' competition the moment she went back to school. To the girls it was more exciting than the war. Miss Elder had seen the photograph and had been shocked to her soul. A beauty competition! Not the sort of thing her girls went in for, and sure to have a bad influence on the school. She tried to counteract the influence in her beginning-of-term speech; it was difficult because obviously the war was the subject she should be speaking on, and as well it seemed to her imperative that Flossie should not realise that her prize-winning had been noticed. She started by assuring the school that the war must be won by the Allies because God and all His angels were on their side. From there she slid to the wonderful work of Army nurses, and managed to give the impression that if they were good-looking, their work would not be wonderful. She began a thread of thought round

the fate of pretty Belgian girls, but was at once in deep water, and left the subject, just hanging in the air. She finished with a parable. She drew a picture of a country village all primroses and chirping birds, and the sun shining on the steeple of the old church. Then war. The village smashed, never a bird to chirp, and the primroses crushed underfoot, and as an added touch, deep snow over everything. "All gone." She paused dramatically. "That village had learned that its beauty was only a surface thing, that could be swept away in a moment. Girls, I want you to take a pride in your appearance, nothing can be nicer to look at than a wholesome young girl, but remember that, like my village, beauty may be swept away any moment, and what is left then? Can any girl tell me? What did my village people learn?"

There was a pause and then a hand shot up.

"That beauty is only a surface thing and can be swept away in a moment."

"That's right, Gladys," Miss Elder nodded at the girl in congratulation. "Now you've heard what I've said, girls, and just bear my words in mind and I am sure we shall all do a splendid term's work, and be ready to serve our country if she should need us. Now before you go to your rooms we will sing 'Lead us, Heavenly Father, lead us, o'er this world's tempestuous sea.'"

As the school clattered to its classrooms, the

verdict on Miss Elder's speech was universal.

"That'll keep young Floss Elk in her place, the stuck-up thing."

One afternoon Fanny persuaded a neighbour to mind the shop, and took Flossie to the Bon Marché. The Bon Marché was the most advanced shopping centre of the neighbourhood; if a new coat or hat were to be bought, the canny considered it well worth the penny bus ride to 'The Marchy' and then you could be sure of the latest style. A skirt for Flossie was the reason for the present expedition, and Fanny wanted to match a piece of silk. They bought the skirt first, and then went down to the silk counter on the ground floor. A woman, and a well-dressed child, were hanging over some bales of green silk, so Fanny, thankful to give her inside a rest, sat down to wait.

The woman pushed away a length.

"No. Must be just right. Most particular, Madame is, about keeping the colours right."

The assistant went away and came back with several more shades. The child pounced on one, fingered it, and held it against a scrap of material.

"This'll do, Mum, the colour's as near as can be, and anyway I'm alone, 't isn't like there are other costumes to put me wrong."

The assistant cut off the necessary length of material, she looked admiringly at the child.

"Dancing for the soldiers?"

"Yes, Madame's arranged a Patriotic Show. I'm Ireland."

The mother looked proudly at the daughter.

"But you ought to see her do her number, dressed up as a colonel. Laugh! You should hear the soldiers."

Fanny had hung on this conversation. She felt that this mother and child were not really very different to herself and Flossie, they probably had much the same home. Yet there was something in the child's manner, and something in the way the assistant spoke to them, that made Fanny feel they were at least on their way to the world Flossie's face should entitle her to. All this was more a feeling than defined thought, but it gave her the courage to speak.

"Excuse me, but does your little girl learn the dancing?"

The woman was delighted to talk of her child's successes.

Kathy? Yes, she's with Madame Elise. She's going on the stage next Christmas when she's ten. 'Kiddy Kathy,' Madame always bills her as, she's a lovely dancer, but she's a comic too. You should see her as a colonel; oh, she does make the boys laugh."

"Can anyone go?"

The woman eyed Fanny's shapeless shabbiness.

"What, to Madame's? No, Madame must see

promise or she won't take a child. What she says is, 'I can have my choice, so I shall just pick an' choose.' Besides it costs money."

Kathy had been looking unblinkingly at Flossie. Every child at the academy knew that Madame never turned down a pretty child.

"Madame'll take her," she said, "if she can pay."

CHAPTER V

By the time she reached the Dancing Academy, Fanny had ceased to care if Madame Elise took her daughter as a pupil or not. She had woken with what she called 'One of me turns,' which meant that her inside felt as if it had dropped a little further than usual. She spent the morning in a fumbling attempt to get everything done, a result which was hindered by her mind which seemed unable to think, and by the shop bell which pinged, every time she got started on anything. She loathed the shop, it had become a vampire sucking, from the daily round, the little life-blood she had to give to it. She was making a wretched job of it too; apart from the fact that there were fewer varieties of fruit and vegetables to be had, Mr. Smith was not buying with the skill George had done. Then too, when George was in the shop, if a customer came in for something they could not have, he saw to it they bought something else. Fanny was no good at that. "Any tomatoes, Mrs. Elk?" She would look round vacantly as though hoping a few might miraculously have appeared while she had been making the beds, and seeing none, would shake her head, move an inch or two nearer to the door to her kitchen, and

say: "No. No tomatoes." 'Elk's' in the Fordham Road lost its reputation. "No good goin' up to Elk's. I know it isn't easy to get things with the war on, but Elk's don't even seem to try."

Dressed and washed, the dinner cleared away, and a neighbour put in to look after the shop, Fanny thankfully led Flossie to the tram terminus. A tram was the slowest means of getting to Madame Elise's Academy, but it entailed no changing, and Fanny thought it safer; she had always known the other side of the river. 'That West End' was no place for a woman to be alone. Flossie insisted on going on the top of the tram, and the journey took an hour, during the whole of which time Fanny felt sick. She closed her eyes and told herself 'it would pass off.' It did not, 'it passed out' and that just as she had left the tram. She leant against a wall shaken, cold, and acutely embarrassed, for with the tram gone about its business, she had no excuse for what had happened. She had felt, years before, the same shame at Southend, when a similar misfortune had overtaken her in the middle of the sea-front, half a mile away from the *Channel Queen* which had been her undoing.

"Oh, I am unlucky, Floss," she said.

Flossie looked at her with dislike.

"Such a show to make of yourself. In the road too."

They walked to the studio, it was not far from

the tram terminus, but Fanny did not feel like walking at all, and her eyes filled with tears when she saw that to reach the Madame Elise Academy you had to climb an immense flight of stone stairs.

At the top of the stairs was a dusty hall, papered with posters of the shows in which the offspring of the Academy had appeared. 'Madame Elise's Little Wonders,' 'Madame Elise's Baby Pierrots,' 'Madame Elise's Dancing Dots,' 'Madame Elise's Wonder Mites,' and as well, programmes of innumerable plays and pantomimes which had a note on them to the effect that 'The children appearing in this production are pupils of The Madame Elise School of Dancing.'

Fanny gazed round with the glazed eyes of the recently sick, and took in nothing, but Flossie pulled her arm; she spoke in a whisper.

"Look, Mum." She pointed to the word 'Office' written over a door. "Do you think we goes in there?"

Fanny never went in through doors with 'Office' written over them, never in fact went through strange doors at all, but they had a letter telling them to come; perhaps it would be all right.

"Maybe you might give a knock, but gently, mind."

Flossie knocked.

"Com'in. Com'in. Com'in."

The door opened into a little room, yellow-tinted

by light which forced its way through an unwashed window. The drabness of the lighting was enhanced by the walls, which showed a little paper of a grubby green, but mainly a mass of photographs in fly-walked frames. Groups of children surrounding some star, or the finales of pantomimes, or single pictures of show performers signed in round childish handwriting, 'To dear Madame, from Babsy,' 'Little Eva' or 'Baby Bubbles.'

Madame was sitting at a knee-hole desk. Tall, scraggy, in a velvet dress that had once been black, a strange garment, in which presumably she lived, for it had no visible fastenings, and yet fitted so closely the likelihood was that it never came off. It bore out this theory by being so overlaid with dust that it never appeared black, but in some lights grey, and in others brown. She was a surprising-looking woman, an unusually white skin was enhanced by eyebrows painted crookedly a gay reddish-brown, eyelashes alternately black-cosmeticked spikes or, since they were dashed on anyhow, their original grey, which gave a piebald look, and a mouth slashed in the colour of a letter-box without the aid of a glass, so it had little bearing on its original shape. Crowning her was a red wig, a wig which, when new, some twenty years before, might have been glossy, with some semblance to real hair, but since it had belonged to Madame, had seen neither comb nor brush. Her legs, sprawled com-

fortably apart, resting on their heels, wore white cotton stockings and pink canvas ballet shoes. Heaven had given her one beauty which neither age nor comicalities of appearance could alter. Shrewd, kindly, very blue eyes. She turned these on the door.

She saw Fanny, and in a flash took in her lack of colour, both of body and soul. Then she studied Flossie. Madame was no procuress, as far as her school was concerned. The head of a woman's college could not have been stricter, and as most of her children's earning ability depended on their looking mere toddlers even when they had reached their late teens, she was seldom made anxious. Later, when choruses and musical halls, and more rarely stardom, had taken them from her, her first thought was a good marriage, what she called 'something comfortable and safe.' Nevertheless, should the marriage not mature, she approved what she called 'The Little Nest,' always provided the little nest was well endowed, and for choice embellished with a coronet. Her dancing establishment was built on a foundation of just such a nest. It had not been a nest at all as far as cosiness was concerned, but rather an iron-barred cage, gilded and even embellished with strawberry leaves, but nevertheless a cage which had imprisoned her, away from the ballet that she loved. Yet looking at her dancing school, the direct result of her faithful years with

her Duke, she could not but feel that her pupils might do worse. Flossie, even at the age of nine, looked like somebody who might be trained to attain to almost anything. Madame's shrewd eyes missed none of her perfections, she even appreciated that such perfect sculpturing would last. She rested her hands on her desk, and slowly withdrew her legs from under it, and stood up.

"Com'long. Com'long. Com'long."

Flossie put up her hand to her mouth and sniggered. Madame gave her a look which made the snigger gurgle into silence. Majestically she led the way. She knew she made new children laugh, she was unconscious that she repeated everything three times, but that there was something humorous about her to the child mind she could not fail to realise. A laugh was a thing she understood, but a snigger, never.

They went into the studio. It was an airy room, lit by skylights, of which there were so many that even the layers of grime on them could not make the place dark; at one end of the room there was a piano, and round the walls were practice bars. A class of girls of fourteen and over, in cotton rompers and ballet shoes, were gripping the bars while doing an intricate exercise on their points. Instructing them was a stout, black-haired woman, dressed in dingy white; a short, pleated skirt, and a blouse. She occasionally, without the support of the bar,

joined in the exercises herself, and when she did so her breasts, which were enormous, bounced up and down in the blouse. At the piano a fair pretty girl, her eyes on the rows of busy feet, thumped out a tune; occasionally she paused and each time she did so, the black-haired instructress roared: "And again, Connie dear, and again."

Connie caught Madame's eye, and raised her eyebrows enquiringly. Madame held up her hand, the piano stopped, and the children, as though they were marionettes whose wires had been cut, dropped limply off the bars.

"Muriel. Muriel. Muriel. Come here. Come here. Come here." The instructress roared the quite superfluous instruction "Rest" and came to Madame. "Try this child. Try this child. Try this child."

Muriel looked at Flossie.

"Got any music, dear?"

Flossie had skipped about to nursery rhymes when she had been in 'The Infants,' but since she had been in 'The Girls' had done nothing more graceful than physical exercises. She raised puzzled eyes to Muriel. Muriel had been looking into children's eyes for the past ten years, ever since the evening when Madame had called her into her room, and had told her that she, the star child, who had fallen from that to front row of the chorus, to the back row, and from there to no job at all, had not the appearance for the stage. The horror of hearing,

put into words, what she had been suspecting, had caused Madame's statement that she was getting too old to teach and proposed that Muriel should take her place, to fall on years closed by misery. That was ten years ago, she was happy in her work: after all, time dulls even the most bitter of frustrations. In all her ten years she had never looked into such eyes as were looking at her now. She spoke gently.

"Take off your things, dear."

The removal of Flossie's hat made Connie sit upright on the piano stool, Madame murmur: "Goodness. Goodness. Goodness," and Muriel stretch out her hand to stroke, only the stony eyes of her watching class made her resist the temptation.

"Come along, darling." She held out her hand. "Connie, play that little polka you play for the babies."

Not all her looks could blind the experienced eyes round her to the fact that Flossie knew nothing of dancing, but she had an ear to keep time, and she was loosely made. Muriel lifting first one of the child's legs over her head, and then the other, nodded at Madame, who poked Fanny with her elbow.

"Com'long. Com'long. Com'long."

Back in the office Madame eyed Fanny; she thought her a poor thing, but saw that she was exhausted; she returned to the door, opened it a crack and yelled, "Tea. Tea. Tea."

A cup of coal-black tea, part of which, awash in

the saucer, was licking away the contour of two lumps of sugar, partially restored Fanny. Madame, in spite of her queries coming in triplicate, succeeded in learning the story of the 'Britain's most beautiful child' competition, and of how George in the Army didn't hold with any such things, and must never know about the dancing. Also of the meeting with Kiddy Kathy. It was from this last that Madame got an inkling of what Fanny was aiming at for her child. She had not run a dancing school without learning what incredible sacrifices mothers will make for their children, but she was moved none the less when Fanny said haltingly:

"Havin' the looks it seems she should do better'n what her dad an' me have done."

Madame lit a cigarette. Fanny was shocked, she had heard of women doing such things, but had never seen one at it. Madame, her smoke curling over her head, neither knew nor cared what Fanny thought, her mind was on Flossie's future. How simple it would be to draw up a contract that would grasp the child's earnings for years; this good-hearted, weak fool would sign anything. Instead she opened a drawer, took out one of her contracts, always fair documents, and with a few strokes of her pen made it more generous than it already was, and shoved it across to Fanny.

"Sign there. Sign there. Sign there."

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Fanny, clutching the contract, which was totally unintelligible to her, and a list of those shoes and garments needed before the first class the following Monday, sank down in their home-bound tram. She looked at her daughter and a faint sigh of satisfaction escaped her.

"I was glad I made you put on those clean drawers, lifting up your legs the way that Muriel did."

CHAPTER VI

THOSE rescued from shipwrecks can only re-tell scattered impressions. Fearful jumps from swinging ladders. Overturned boats gripped by icy fingers. Long hours in embarrassing juxtaposition to fellow-humans so sunk in discomfort that all behaviour became possible.

In retrospect, that is how the next three years were to Fanny. She closed the shop. She was surprised at herself for doing it, surprised that 'Elk's' was no more, but Flossie had to be taken to classes, and mornings had to be spent in food queues that Flossie might be properly fed; she could not run a shop as well. Heaven knows what scraps Fanny ate in order that Flossie should never go short.

Flossie became ten, she was old enough to have a licence, she was put into a troupe in a pantomime. Flossie must leave the Fordham Road 'Girls,' she must share the troupe governess, Fanny must go and explain to Miss Elder. So far, Fanny had been borne up in the rush of her existence, by the knowledge that, however exhausting her life, she was doing grand things for her child. The interview with Miss Elder was not a help to one who needed all the bear-

ing up she could have; what she said became, in the days that followed, a memory apt to give a feeling of sinking. 'Beauty was a danger, Fanny by exploiting it was committing a sin. if Flossie came to a bad end as she assuredly would, she had only her mother to blame.' Washing endless frilly garments, stitching at layer after layer of tarleton, fighting in food queues, struggling over her stove to make what she had been able to buy palatable, pushing her way into buses and trams to deliver Flossie, waiting in draughty stage doors to take her home, sitting on the floor of a cellar with Flossie asleep in her arms, Fanny remembered what Miss Elder had said. Later, pride covered the searing words. Flossie was one of a small troupe, Flossie danced a solo, Flossie was a juvenile star, other mothers envied. It was always a little surprising to Fanny that she could be envied, plain Mrs. Elk from the Fordham Road. Her visions were no longer dim like smoke, they were built on facts.

George, safely buried in a trench somewhere, had no place in the new world Fanny was building for Flossie. On his leaves she was glad to see him, but he was an interlude merely; all he said and did were outside the business of her life. He fussed about things which did not matter, whether he would get his trade back after the war, that the Ethbridges at number ten had lost their boy. He had two leaves after Flossie had her licence, but on

neither occasion was she working, and while he was at home she did not even go to her classes. On his second leave a neighbour asked him if he was not proud of his daughter's success. Arrived home he ruffled Flossie's hair.

"What's all this dancing you're doin' at the school? Cooking and sewing will do you more good if you want a nice husband."

Flossie, in romper and ballet shoes, or alternatively little ankle-strapped patent leather ones for character work, learnt first to loosen up her muscles, and then to get up on her points. Gradually her knees straightened, her instep was arched but firm, her arms and hands learnt to curve. Flossie learnt to be an efficient dancer, never for a second was a movement of hers inspired by ecstasy, but always by technique. The years flicked by her marked by rises in status. From a new child to a second term one, from there to a third, and then at the beginning of her second year she had a licence. That Christmas of 1916 she became one of Madame's 'Twenty Khaki Kids.' In the summer of seventeen, she was one of Madame's 'Ten Little Sailors,' the Christmas of the same year she was one of Madame's 'Four Little Snowflakes,' in the spring of eighteen, billed as 'Baby Flora,' she was Cupid in a revue, and that summer, solo dancer and singer in the Academy star troupe, Madame Elise's 'Twenty Little Marvels,' and when peace was declared she was

already rehearsing the part of the girl babe for a West End pantomime.

The beginning of her training Flossie disliked intensely. She liked wearing a romper, she was proud of her shoes, she liked gossiping and giggling with the other children, and she liked Saturday afternoons, when in relays the entire school worked at elocution and singing, but these were the only things she did like. She found nothing amusing in the classes. Loosening her muscles was a weary task.

"Left leg, right leg. Higher, higher. Flossie, you aren't working. Rest, girls, Flossie will do it alone. And again, Connie dear, and again."

Then the next phase, the lessons lengthened by half an hour, point work. Her toes throbbed, no amount of cotton wool seemed to help, often they bled. Her instep got cramp, her muscles, especially those in her calves, ached monotonously, her hands got blistered from gripping the bar, but Muriel was remorseless.

"Flossie, you aren't working. Flossie, you can do that exercise alone. And again, Connie dear, and again."

There were daily scenes, Flossie howled, she sulked, but always Fanny got her to her lesson. What made Flossie see any sense in what she was doing was a charity *matinée*. It was a large affair in aid of comforts for prisoners of war; the Academy's share

was a ballet and tableaux. All those children who were not working appeared either as emblematic patriotic figures, or as one of the allied countries, and as a finale, Flossie as the dove of peace wobbled in on her toes. The applause which greeted her was tumultuous, partly because, with an air raid the night before, and an appalling list of casualties in the paper, even Flossie in a white feathered ballet frock was a divine messenger, 'Perhaps, some day.' But also because as a dove, she really looked delicious. Afterwards Madame was sent a doll by one of the committee, and asked to give it to 'that darling little Peace.' Flossie did not care for dolls, but this was such a magnificent specimen that it was worth carrying about to inspire envy in other small girls, and it made her think. She knew that later she would earn money, but she knew from the other children how very little of that she would have to spend—but presents! That put a different complexion on things. From that moment her work improved. Muriel, seeing in Flossie those gifts which would have made of her own life such a different thing, was as unremitting in her efforts as ever, but after the *matinée* her adjurations changed.

"Glissade—*changé*. Coupé. Coupé. Passé—*relevé*. Mind your knee, Flossie dear. Splendid. Coupé. Coupé. Pirouette. And again, Connie dear, and again."

Then came her licence and the rehearsals for "The

'Twenty Khaki Kids.' 'The Khaki Kids' were either beginners, or older children who had remained undersized, and would continue to dance while they looked like children, but who had not sufficient talent to have any future on the adult stage. They were the least important of all Madame's troupes, but Flossie was glad to join them, as no matter in what you were appearing the fact that you were working gave you a status in the Academy. They performed in 'Sinbad the Sailor,' at an outlying suburban theatre, and made their first appearance in the ship scene, springing unexpectedly out of coils of rope, a neat little row of dancing khaki figures.

One rehearsal in the theatre made Flossie suspect that she had entered a world of undreamed-of possibilities, and a week convinced her of it. The presents she received! Food was scarce, but even so, titbits found their way to Flossie. The Matron did her best to stop it. Madame was strict, she liked her children to keep themselves to themselves, holding as little intercourse as possible with the grown-up members of the cast. Ordinarily this presented no difficulties, the grown-ups finding the children a bore, and paying no attention to them except to sign their autograph books, or perhaps, at the end of the run to give them a photograph of themselves mounted on a post card. With Flossie it was different, the news of her flew round the theatre.

"I say, old dear, give us a lend of your duster. You 'ave a look when they're re'earsin' this mornin', there's the sweetest little kid comes on, right in the middle she is, you must 'ave a look."

"Oh, this old B. of a staircase, I'm sick and tired of marching up and down it. Do they think we girls don't know how to walk up a lot of stairs? Have you seen the little kid with the troupe, the one with the fair hair, isn't she a love?"

The soubrette, moving two empty beer bottles, swung herself up on the edge of the bar, and patted the place beside her for her dancing partner.

"Let's rest a moment, the old wind was never too good, but this bread we're getting now! Have you seen the little thing with the troupe, little thing with pale hair? Well, have a look, what a butel!"

Her dresser waved a pair of pale blue silk tights at the principal boy.

"With this war on tights 'as gone to pot, I don't know 'ow we're goin' to do for them an' that's a fact, ladder as soon as look at you." Expertly she held them out, turned to put on. "I say, dear, that little child you told me of, oh she's the sweetest thing, and so winnin' in 'er ways. I was 'avin' a bitter tea and a piece of cake when the troupe passes the door and she gave me the loveliest smile, so I gave her a bit of cake, bless her, she was ever so pleased."

The comedian met the children on the stairs and

he stood back to let them pass. Without his bonnets and bead mantles and elastic-sided boots, he was a gloomy fellow, not one to stop and pass the time of day, but Flossie, last of the queue, paused to look up at him from under her lashes, then she smiled. He leant down to her.

"How are you, my dear?"

"Very well, thank you," Flossie whispered. She whispered because Matron was only a few steps ahead, but the comedian thought how wistful she sounded; awful hard life for the kids with getting about so difficult, and the food so bad. He put his hand into his pocket and brought out a shilling.

'Madame Elise's Ten Little Sailors' did a round of the London halls. From Flossie's point of view it was less successful than the pantomime, as there was no permanent cast to bring her presents, but during the time she worked with them she learnt how to get hold of her earnings. It started over spring clothes.

"Mum, can I have a blue coat?"

"How can you talk so silly? You know I spent all last week letting down your pink one, and it's as good as new."

"But I had it last summer. I want a blue one."

"Now don't take on," Fanny pleaded. "Mum isn't made of money."

Flossie scratched at the carpet with the toe of her shoe.

"Well, I earn some, don't I?" she muttered in a slightly shamed way.

Fanny looked flustered.

"But, ducks, you know that with the money I bank for you every week, and what goes to Madame on commission, there's not much left for all the things I buy you, every penny's spent on you, and a lot more besides, you know that."

"Well, that's what you say. I don't seem to have much."

Fanny allowed this dart to pierce her, she burst into tears.

"Oh, how can you talk that way, Floss, you, with all the nice things you have? I know I never seem to stop sewing and washin' for you."

Flossie, really ashamed, grew more defiant.

"Well, if I've got to go about in my old pink, I'll stay at home."

She never meant it, the words were just something to say, but Fanny believed her.

"Don't talk like that, sweet, Mum'll manage the blue for you. You must work, dear, Mum's so proud of her girl."

'The Four Little Snowflakes' taught Flossie that an audience is more than just a sea of blurred faces. Every audience varies, and has each its collective personality. The ability to feel that personality differs with artists, but there is no one who, after one entrance, cannot say, "They're nice to-night,

grand comedy lot," or "They're going to eat that curtain to the second act." Flossie, spinning prettily on her points, became acutely sensitive to her audiences; she knew they were saying, "Oh, isn't she sweet," and when, with her three companions, she was throwing kisses and dropping curtsies at the end of her dance, she knew that it was because of her kisses and her curtsies that they were given the extra call. Then there came tangible signs of her popularity. She was the smallest of the Snowflakes, and almost every day the attendants brought her parcels marked 'To the Little Snowflake' or 'To the Smallest Snowflake' and once to 'The Fairest Snowflake.'

As Cupid she was noticed by the critics, which meant several visits to the photographer's, and after the photographs were published, a certain amount of fan mail. She was eleven at the time, but small for her age, and the company as usual made a fuss of her, telling each other it did no harm as she was a simple unspoilt little thing. At home, if Fanny could have criticised her prodigy, there was a different story to tell. It seemed to Flossie insulting that she, so lovely and so wonderful, should be asked to do menial things. Sometimes Fanny, rushed beyond bearing, and exhausted by long hours in the food queues, would forget, and suggest she lay the table, or make her bed. Flossie's answer never varied.

"If people want children to do those sort of things, they shouldn't have children like me."

At the Academy she was the object of much discussion. Success had come to her too easily, but it was a child's success and would not last; if she were to have any future as a dancer, hours of grinding work lay ahead of her. Muriel slaved.

"Battement—serré. Right up on that point, Flossie. Keep that right knee straight. Good. Now the other foot, straighten that left knee. And again, Connie dear, and again."

Madame called Muriel into her study.

"Wha' about Flossie? Wha' about Flossie? Wha' about Flossie?" She held out a packet of cigarettes.

"Only if she works. She has those looks, and any amount of personality, but, of course, she's not a dancer and never will be." Muriel puffed at her cigarette. "If she works she might be a star though, in a musical show." She sighed. "She might be anything."

"Wha' about Flossie? Wha' about Flossie? Wha' about Flossie?" Madame asked the governess.

The governess, a Miss Edwards, was afraid of neither Madame nor anybody else. She had thought Flossie a lovely little dear for just one morning.

"The child's a little toad. A smug little toad. So far she has always been in some show and I've not been allowed to upset her, and she knows it, but the first morning she's out of work, I'm going

to talk to her as she's never been talked to before."

Flossie knew that she was not really loved at the Academy by either teachers or pupils, but she put this down to jealousy. Sitting in a tram, homeward-bound from the theatre, she mentioned it to her mother.

"I can't help being pretty, can I, Mum?"

"Course you can't. Who says you can?"

"Well, just the other children, they don't like me."

"Spiteful cats. Don't you mind, ducks, it's jealousy. Mum's wonderful girl."

Just as the rehearsals for the 'Babes in the Wood' were starting, the Armistice was declared.

"Now isn't that awkward?" said Fanny. "Your dad'll be comin' home."

CHAPTER VII

It was summer before George got home. He walked up the Fordham Road in his creased-looking mufti, nodding greetings, and saying a few words to any who noticed his return, but scarcely taking in who they were, for though his feet were on the asphalt, his head was in the clouds.

Three months' hobbling on crutches because of a wounded foot had given him a thing he had never possessed before, leisure. The hospital to which he had been sent was an unattractive barrack-like affair in the north, but for George it had attraction, because it was within a few minutes' walk of the town allotments. Day after day he had taken himself up there, and minutely examined the crops, and had long talks with the gardeners. He had been fortunate in his time, for at the end of February, when he arrived, he had seen much of the sowing and planting, and by the beginning of June, when he left, crops almost full-grown. Ruminating over the vegetables of others, he had conceived an idea. 'Why shouldn't he have a bit of ground and grow stuff for his shop? Not a London allotment, that would be difficult to get, but somewhere in the country, maybe Essex, where he could go and work

on a Saturday afternoon, and Sundays. When the weather was good, he could take Fanny and Flossie along with him, have a picnic they could, maybe he'd find time to put up a bit of a hut where Fanny could sit out of the wind. A bit of earth of his own. Stuff he'd planted, pushing its way up.' Unconsciously his head rose a fraction. 'He could see to it right away to-morrow even. If it was a nice day, why shouldn't the three of them take their dinner out, and see if they couldn't find the bit of ground he had in mind?' As he neared the house he slowed up, filled with his nearest approach to excitement. He could see Fanny, bent over her stove, she'd be getting the tea. 'He'd creep in quietly and hug her from behind. It had been a good idea not telling exactly which day he was coming, it would be good to see her surprise. After a bit he'd open the presents he had, or maybe he'd keep those till Flossie got in from school, they'd be pleased with those, never believe he'd made them all himself. The cushion for Fanny with the King's head and all the flags of the Allies embroidered on it, and the little purse for Floss, made in red, white, and blue beads.' He reached the gate, opened it cautiously so it would not creak, slipped through the door and into the kitchen.

Fanny was bent over her stove just as he thought she would be. Down went his grip on the floor and she was in his arms.

"George! You old silly." For a moment, as she clung to him, Fanny forgot that here was the stumbling-block in the way of Flossie's future, and knew him only as her George, solid, reliable, something to lean her tired body against, and take her cares off her shoulders.

George was shocked at her appearance; on his leaves he had thought her looking tired, but then her tiredness was part of a general tiredness, but now other people were bucking up, why wasn't Fanny?

"You been feelin' your drop? You don't look right."

Fanny pushed him from her, nervous under his scrutiny.

"Go on, you old silly, I'm lovely in meself. Why didn't you let me know you was comin'?"

"Thought I'd give you an' Floss a surprise." He glanced at the clock on the dresser. "She'll be comin' along soon now, won't she? I'll step up the road and meet her."

Fanny pretended to busy herself with the lid of the kettle.

"It's no good doin' that. She don't come home to tea."

"Whyever not?"

"Well, she's changed her school, she's a bit further away."

"She's never got into the secondary, has she?"

You never told me."

"No, she hasn't. Now you sit down and let me get your tea, Mr. Talkative, or you won't have none."

"But what about Flossie's school?"

Fanny laughed nervously.

"Aren't you impatient? I'll tell you all the news just so soon as I've got this set."

George sat down, looking in a worried way at Fanny's back. He was not one who ever had suspicions about people, least of all about his own family. There was his home fixed and unalterable. At any hour of the day during the last four years, he would, had he been asked, have told exactly what his wife and child were doing. 'Four o'clock? Fan'll be just putting on the kettle. Twelve? My Floss'll have her eye on the clock, glad to be gettin' 'ome to her dinner.' Even obvious changes in other people's arrangements, such as he read of in the papers, the hours spent in food queues, the nights in cellars, did not seem to have any bearing on his own belongings. But now he could not fail to see that Fanny was nervous, and seemed as if she had something on her mind.

Fanny put the teapot on the table, and a cake, loaf, jam, and butter, and spooned some tea into the pot, all the while avoiding his eye.

"Sorry there isn't relish, I'd have had a spread if I'd known you was comin', I meant to slip out

and get a bit of fish after I'd had a cup, I generally have something late with Floss." She broke off: how Flossie did keep coming into the conversation, if only George had said he was coming, she'd have kept her at home, no need to have had this fuss for a day or two.

George took the cup of tea she passed him, and put in some sugar, and stirred vigorously.

"You got something on your mind, my girl. Best let us have it and get it over. What's up with Floss?"

Fanny swallowed.

"Well——" she looked at him pleadingly. "I know you aren't going to like it, George; you being so religious-minded, I ought to 'ave told you when you was 'ome on your leaves, but there didn't seem no point in upsettin' of you then."

George patted her hand.

"Come on, out with it. What's she been up to?"

"She's on the stage."

George put down his cup, and stared at her a moment with incomprehension. At last he said:

"On the stage! Whatever for?"

"Now look here," Fanny leant towards him, "you've got to try and understand. Our Floss is beautiful. You should read what the papers say; I'll show you after, I've all the pieces kept. It don't seem right her havin' all those looks and just doin' no better than what we done, slavin' day in day out, never no clothes nor——" she saw the expression on

his face, "Oh, I don't mean I 'aven't been 'appy along of you—I have, you know that. But Floss is different, everybody says so."

George felt the words he heard could have no belief behind them. His Fan didn't think that way.

"The stage! You know what the minister says, Fanny, you 'eard 'im, same as I done. It's a lure of Satan, that's what he says."

Fanny began to cry.

"I knew that's how you'd talk, that's why I never told you before." She held her sobs back. "You got to try and understand. We 'aven't no ordinary child, she's wonderful, everybody says she is; you 'aven't no right to stand in 'er way, you can't do it." She put her head on her arms and broke down completely.

George got up and patted her shoulder.

"There, don't take on. I dare say no great 'arm's done. You meant all right, I suppose."

Fanny half raised her head, there was a gleam of hope in her look.

"You don't mind?"

"Well, I don't say that, but she's young, and maybe 'as not got contaminated and set in Satan's ways. Where is she now?"

"At her dancing lesson."

"Dancin'! So that was what all the talk of her dancin' was last time I was home." He looked down at Fanny, flabbergasted. "You acted very deceitful."

A sob answered him. "When does she go to this theatre?"

"She's not workin' now."

"And never will again."

Fanny jumped up, her face streaming with tears, she spoke in jerks through her sobs.

"You 'aven't the right to say what Floss'll do. She's different from you an' me. 'Tisn't only her face: she seems to 'ave the right to better things. Seems like the terrible time I 'ad when she was born was meant, it was a showin' from 'eaven that she was somethin' special. Sometimes I think that she ain't ours."

"Not ours? Well, we knows she's yours. Not mine, you mean?" He spoke the words without his brain behind them, and then paused while they sunk in. He turned an odd grey colour, "Fan, you ain't tryin' to tell me Floss ain't mine? There weren't no other man?"

Fanny was pulled out of her hysteria.

"How can you talk so silly?"

"It's what you said."

"I didn't then. I said she was different from the other children, and 'as a right to 'ave things nice, we can't give 'em her, then let her get them for 'er-self. As an actress she can. Just think, no washin' nor sewin' nor scrubbin', no baby to look after same time as gettin' the work done, she'll have servants to do things for her, and a motor-car to ride in, no

trams for her, and a nurse for her children, and lovely clothes, and no livin' in places like this, she'll live where things is beautiful——”

George stopped her by laying his hand on hers; his voice was stern.

“What you’re sayin’ isn’t so much wrong as rank foolishness. Where you got all this silly talk from I don’t know, it’s me bein’ at the war, you never would have acted so if I’d been home. Do you suppose God would have sent us Floss without knowin’ what He was doin’? He put her down just where He meant her to stay——” Fanny opened her mouth, he raised a finger at her, “let me say what I have to say and don’t you interrupt. And ‘avin’ put ‘er down right here in the Fordham Road, He expected you and me to see she grew up a nice sensible wife to some man in that station of life to which He had called ‘er. Cars, servants, nurses indeed, they may be all right for some people, but folk like us don’t want such things, we’re able to look after our own homes. If there was less tryin’ to better yourself in this world, there’d be a deal less un’appiness if you ask me. There’s a hymn which says ‘The rich man in his castle, the poor man at ‘is gate, God made them ‘igh and lowly and ordered their estate,’ an’ you couldn’t want nicer words.” He pushed back his cup and saucer. “Now, Fan, my girl, we don’t want a lot of hard words spoilin’ things my first day ‘ome, so I’ll say no more, but there’s an end to all

this foolishness. Floss'll go to the school up the road same as she always done, and she'll start the day after to-morrow." He patted her hand. "To-morrow I planned a little treat—how would you like a day in the country? There, don't cry, I got a little present for you. Like to see what it is?"

George had gone down to have a glass of beer at the 'Cock and Hen' when Flossie came in. Fanny was sitting in the armchair, her eyes red with crying.

"What's up, Mum? You do look a sight."

Fanny got up and went to the mirror on the wall, and tried to improve her appearance.

"I've been upset. Your dad's home. He asked where you were almost as soon as he was inside the door. I had to tell him. I wasn't expecting him so soon, and hadn't thought what to say. He's taken it bad. He says you've got to give it all up."

"Does he? Get my tea, I'm tired, I've told you a dozen times to have it ready." Flossie sprawled into the chair Fanny had just left. "You made a muddle of it, I suppose? I might have known you would. What's he want to come sneaking home for anyway? Couldn't send a p.c. to say he was coming, I suppose."

"He meant to surprise us."

"And he has." She saw the cushion-cover George had given Fanny lying on the dresser; she got up and fetched it. "My God!"

"Don't take the Lord's name like that," Fanny said sharply, "I don't know what your dad would say if he heard you."

Flossie giggled.

"Have you seen it, the King's head and all those flags? Isn't it terrible?"

"Put it down." Fanny went over and took it from her, and folded it, and put it in a drawer. "He worked it all himself. There's nothing to laugh at; if you want to have a laugh I'll give you something. He says you're to go back to the Fordham Road Girls'."

Flossie's eyes narrowed, she looked at her mother witheringly.

"You let him say that? You have made a mess of it. Fordham Road Girls'? Funny, isn't he? I see Flora Elk, the child star, at Fordham Road Girls'."

"He means it, dear." Fanny went to her kettle which was boiling. "Can you do with a cup of tea just now, I'm running out to get something tasty. Mum's been so upset, or it would 'ave been ready."

"The sooner you get out the better, and don't be too quick coming back. You leave Dad to me. Don't want you round snivelling, you've made enough trouble as it is."

Fanny filled the teapot with eyes misted with tears.

"Don't blame Mum, dear, she did try, honest she did."

When George came in Flossie was sitting at the table drinking her tea; she had the embroidered cushion beside her plate. She saw him and jumped up, and threw her arms round his neck.

"My darling Daddy."

He was warmed through by her greeting, and hugged her and stroked her hair.

"Glad to see your old Dad?"

She nodded and wriggled out of his arms, and picked up the cushion cover, she looked at him with eyes rounded with surprise.

"Did you do all this?"

"Yes," he fumbled in his pocket, "and something else too." He handed her the purse.

Flossie gazed at the red, white, and blue beads and fought an inclination to giggle, then she raised her eyes brimming with gratitude.

"It's lovely, I never did have anything so pretty before. You are clever."

He gave her a slight affectionate push.

"Go on and have your tea."

She went back to the table.

"Do you mind if I have another cup?" she sighed.
"I'm a little tired."

"What's all this silliness your Mum's been telling me about?" He sat in the armchair and lit his

pipe. Flossie studied him out of the corner of her eye. She took a sip of tea, then put down her cup and ran over and perched on the arm of his chair.

"Do you think it's silliness?"

"It's worse, Floss, my girl. You aren't to blame, you knew no better; it's a sin, that's what it is, play-acting, and making a show of yourself; they're Satan's ways."

She nodded gravely.

"I thought perhaps you would say that, I told Mum I thought we ought to ask you first. But you know, Dad, I think God will understand. You see you didn't make much money being a soldier and Mum used to cry. Then one day in a shop, I met a little girl and she told me that she made lots of money to help her mother, so I asked Mum if I might help her, and I went and learnt to dance, and then when I was bigger, I went on the stage." She raised her eyes pleadingly, "I have helped, really truly I have."

George was moved.

"I'm sure you have," he said huskily, "and it's certain God will understand what was in your heart. But you see, dear, your mother," he fumbled for words, "well, she's got silly notions, she wants you to go on with it."

"And you don't want me to?"

" 'Tisn't a case of 'I don't want,' it's a case of 'I won't have.' "

Flossie never moved her eyes off his face, not by the quiver of a muscle did she show what she felt.

"Dear Dad," she said softly.

He stroked her hair.

"You've got to forget all about it, Floss, and go back to school, and work hard at cooking, and sewing and that, like a sensible girl, and then come Christmas year, when you're old enough to leave, you'll be able to be home and help your Mum about the house. You'd like that, wouldn't you?"

Flossie ran her finger up and down her father's sleeve, playing for time, then slipped her fingers between his.

"I don't want to go back to Fordham Road Girls'."

"Why?"

"I don't think Miss Elder liked me. You see I liked things the other girls didn't, she wanted us to be very good at gymnasium, and I don't see what girls want with it, do you?"

He smiled at her.

"Where d'you want to go then?"

"I like it where I go now."

She felt his arm stiffen.

"Where you learn to dance?"

She laughed and rubbed her face against his sleeve.

"Silly Dad, that's somewhere quite different. I mean where I do lessons of course."

"What do they teach you there?"

"Everything: scripture and sewing, and how to wash clothes, and cooking—we do a lot of cooking."

"What school is it?"

"It belongs to someone called Madame Elise—she's French, you know—it's a sort of private school. I'm happy there, Dad; may I stay?"

George looked proudly at her eager face.

"I suppose so, if you're happy, and your Mum says it's all right, but no dancing, mind, I won't have it." The gate clicked. "That'll be your Mum back with the supper, I could do with a bite."

Fanny came in, and after one anxious look at them both, crossed to the dresser, and unwrapped a haddock. Flossie danced over to her.

"Can I help you, Mum? Dad says I'm to leave the stage, it's not good for me, but he says I can go on going to school at Madame Elise's. I told him how well I learn to cook there. You did say I cooked nicely, didn't you?" She gave Fanny a sharp kick on the ankle.

Part II

CHAPTER VIII

"Is that 2210? Can I speak to Miss Margaret Shane, please?"

"Speaking. My God! What an hour to ring up."

"Mr. Leon Low wants to speak to you."

"Mr. Leon Low? Put him through."

There was a pause and then a man's voice.

"Good morning, Mouse."

"Hullo, L.L. You're damned early."

"Sorry, did I wake you? Is it true you are thinking of letting your flat?"

"Yes."

"What's the trouble? Money?"

"Need you ask. The wolf's gnawed his way right through the door and is having a meal off the hall carpet."

"I've got an idea that might help. Would you like to lunch?"

Mouse giggled.

"Darling, were you thinking of keeping me?"

He laughed.

"Savoy Grill, one o'clock?"

"Right."

Mouse put down the receiver and yelled "Mrs. Hodge," then wriggled down into her pillows.

Mrs. Hodge was a sack of a woman held tightly in the middle by her apron strings, and bulging, above and below them, like the two halves of a cottage loaf. The bulge below was of such a size that had she not looked past the age for such things, she must have been taken for one expecting a baby in the immediate future. She was conscious that her figure was not what it had been, but she knew the reason. "It was on account of me goin' to the 'ospital to have my Georgie, they never pressed me out after, like the nurse always done at 'ome." If her age had been judged solely on appearance, she was an old woman, a husband whose alcohol-befuddled nights had been brought to an end by pneumonia, and the rearing of eight children on a minute income and much courage, had taken the colour from her hair, and caused most of her teeth to fall out, but she had a verve and gaiety which belied these things. "Oh, I 'ave 'ad a lovely time since my po'r Alfie was took," she would say. "Even Georgie, my baby, is workin' now, that's how I can 'do' for people." She had 'done' for several people before she had come to Mouse, and had found a certain excitement with them all, but now she felt in a world such as she saw on the pictures, a world in which anything might happen. "Of course, doin' for people the way I do, life can't help but be int'restin', seems like w'ot 'appens to them, 'appens to you, but Miss Shanel! She's a scream! We do see lifel"

In answer to Mouse's yell, she opened the bedroom door, and looked at her inquiringly.

"Was you wantin' breakfast or your Bromo Seltzer?"

"Coffee, and see it's hot and strong; the stuff you made yesterday was foul."

"Well, dear, that wasn't the coffee, that was the way you was feelin'. I put in the same number of spoonfuls I always done."

"Go on, you old fool. It's half-past ten, and I've got to go out to lunch."

As the door closed, Mouse picked up the telephone again, and dialled a City number. In answer to the impersonal Cockney voice at the other end of the line, she asked if Lord Menton was in. The Cockney voice said monotonously: "Who's speaking?" And hearing her name, put her through without further questions.

"Hullo, Jim."

"Hullo, Sweet."

"I can't meet you for lunch."

"Why not?"

"I'm lunching with Leon Low."

"Whatever for?"

"I've no idea. He heard I had to let my flat, and said he'd got an idea."

"I like his nerve. If you must let your flat, I'll let it for you. There's no need for him to come butting in."

"Don't be silly, Sweet, he may have got an idea. There's no harm in hearing it. Something's got to be done, you know, or I shall be entertaining the bums and Mrs. Hodge wouldn't like that, it isn't what she's used to."

"I do wish you'd see reason, Mouse, I hate to think of you worried like this; why won't you let me help?"

"Now don't let's go all over that again——"

"But——"

"There aren't any 'buts.' Come in for a drink about five, and I'll tell you the dirt."

Mouse stared round the restaurant, and felt conscious that she looked her best, and that their table was the subject of gossip at most of the others. She took out her mirror. There was no vanity in the long scrutiny she gave her face, she had been looking at it for nearly forty years, and had watched it achieve almost perfection, and as well, had watched that perfection decline. She did not know exactly when the deterioration had started, but she knew all the landmarks that marked the road downhill. The touch of colour where her hair was losing its auburn, the hollows drawn from her nostrils to the corner of her mouth, the wrinkles round her eyes, the sag in the skin under her chin. Nevertheless, she was quite satisfied as she put away her glass, years could not alter the way her bones were made, all her days, the outline of beauty would be

hers. She saw L.L. had been watching her, and nodded at him as she closed her bag.

"Old ladies like me have to watch their faces."

"You've never had to worry."

"I haven't done much with it, have I?"

"You've done what you wanted, I suppose? If you couldn't, no one could."

"Yes, I've done what I wanted as far as limitations allowed."

"Limitations?" He looked at her with raised eyebrows. "Does that mean you are always going to waste your time on that man of yours?"

"Jim?" She smiled. "I don't find it a waste."

"But it can't lead anywhere. What about his wife?"

"Jasmine? Oh, she and I understand each other." Her tone was a definite dismissal of the subject. There was a slight pause. "We didn't come here to discuss my goings on, did we? What about my flat? Had you thought I could keep the wolf at bay by a return to the stage to play my well-known part of lady guest with one line to say?"

The waiter brought the sweet. L.L. waited till he had gone.

"It's rather a long story. I had an audition last week for girls for the Follies at the Windsor. I sat for hours, usual business, forty-nine out of every fifty a dud. Then a kid came on—" he broke off, and looked thoughtfully at Mouse—"the first time I ever saw you, and that's—"

"Go on, ducky, no need to start counting how long ago it was."

"She's a little like you were then. Something the same effect, but quite a different type. She's small, well-made, hair so fair that it's almost white, but something of your forehead and your nose, and that width here." With his fingers he spanned the place between his eyes.

"And you got up in the stalls and said, 'Gi'me, gi'me, gi'me.' "

"No. I just engaged her, and someone took her name and address."

"She's going into the Follies?"

"She was, but two days later she sent back the contract and said she couldn't do it. I'd been thinking quite a bit about her in the meantime, so I sent a letter asking her to come and see me."

"That's new for you. I thought girls stood in queues on the chance of working for you."

"You've not seen her. I tell you she's the find of a generation or my flair's gone."

"Did she come?"

"Yes. And told her story. She's had a rough time. As a small kid her father went to the war, just as a private, he had to give up his job, and of course that meant there was very little money at home, and they had no servant. The child didn't like to see her mother slaving all day, and managed to get taken on at a school of dancing, and through that, as soon

as she was old enough, got some work, and as far as I could gather, practically kept the home going. When the father came back from the front, instead of being grateful, he knocked the kid about, and made her stop working and come home to be a household drudge."

Mouse sniffed.

"I do hope you've got a spare handkerchief, darling, this story always has made me cry, but she should have been a clergyman's daughter."

"Well, I'm not usually fooled, I think it's true this time, don't believe the girl could tell a lie. Simple little thing, with the most honest blue eyes you ever saw."

"My poor L.L., this is most affecting. What's the little pet's name?"

"Flora Elk. Unbelievable, isn't it? Of course we'll have to change that."

"Change it? She is going on the stage, then, in spite of a cruel father?" She looked enquiringly at L.L. "Where do I figure in this story?"

"When I was in America I bought 'Looby.'"

Mouse giggled.

"Did you think that was a secret? Don't you ever read your gossip column? 'I ran into L.L. at the Savoy Grill last night, he was looking very well, I thought, after his strenuous time in New York. While there, he bought 'Looby,' Broadway's latest success. I understand we are to be allowed to see

it soon, the cast is not yet completely settled, but Clara Drew will play the name part, her first appearance since her honeymoon.' Like to hear any more?"

"Since that stuff appeared Clara's started a baby."

"Accident? Or did she mean to?"

"Being under contract to me, she says it's an accident, but she and Ted are both pleased. Ted's doing the 'Home isn't a home without a child' stunt."

"He'll need to feel that way when he comes in late after the show and the baby howls all night."

"Later on, it will be good publicity for Clara, but it's put me in a hole over 'Looby.' I've guaranteed production in six months, they'll give me a short extension, but not enough to get Clara on her feet. Given the right sort of glamour, that show'll run a year."

"And Flora Elk is the right glamour?"

"I think so. She can dance quite enough, she can sing reasonably, and her face would fill any theatre."

"Well, that's a help to you, but how's it going to help me?"

The waiter brought the coffee, L.L. waited patiently till he had poured out both cups, then he handed Mouse a cigarette, lit one for himself, and drew his chair a shade closer to hers.

"This Elk girl has a flaw. She has the worst refined accent I have heard in years, she says 'Oh fency,' and 'Thenks ever so,' and 'Oh ai sa-ay'—it's

excruciating. I'll send her to Myra Ling for elocution and singing, and that'll put her right as far as the part is concerned, but if she is to make the sort of success I see her making, she's got to get rid of that accent on and off. It's a funny thing, Mouse, have you ever noticed, you can get away with any commonness in London, but you must not be refined. After I had that talk with the Elk, I brought Ferdie down to see her—he'll direct 'Looby'—he'd seen her at the audition of course, but not to talk to, and he agreed with me that she was a diamond, but he was dubious about getting her ready in six months; he said her accent was lousy, and the only chance we had was to get her away from home to live with somebody who spoke the King's English, and knew what was what."

Mouse nodded, pleased at having solved the puzzle.

"Me."

"That's what we thought, you're perfect for the job."

"Will the cruel father allow it?"

L.L. shrugged his shoulders.

"I don't know. He might if you persuade him, if not I'll try money, but sometimes that rough type can be got round by a woman."

"Me persuade him!"

He saw she disliked the idea, he patted her hand.

"You can try, Mouse: plain clothes and no paint,

'Lady of the Manor' stuff, you know. I'll lend you my car, of course. It's worth your while to try, because if you get her, you can shove her in your empty bedroom, and I'll pay your entire rent for six months."

There was a pause while Mouse studied her cigarette, then she raised her head.

"You know, L.L., nobody admires the professions of Pimp and Procuress more than I do, but they don't happen to be mine."

L.L. looked horrified.

"My dear Mouse! What are you imagining? This is simply a business matter. I shall put the girl under long contract and get my money back. Surely you know me too well to suppose——?"

"I know you far too well to suppose your intentions are honourable; they never have been, why should they be now? I'm not criticising you, my sweet, but simply stating facts."

"You've got me all wrong, I've only one idea in my head, and that's to get this girl drilled up to play 'Looby.' Come on, Mouse, be a sport, don't hold out on me."

Mouse laughed, she picked up her bag and gloves.

"I'll come back to the office with you, and we'll get the whole scheme laid out, but," she stood up and looked at him squarely, "I'll agree just so long as there's no funny business. The day you start that, the Elk goes back to Daddy."

CHAPTER IX

FLOSSIE had never heard of Margaret Shane, but on principle she disliked women, so it was with no pleasure that she climbed her stairs in Shepherd Market, and rang the bell. Mrs. Hodge showed her into the sitting-room. She thought it queer, so little furniture and so many flowers, and odd to have a blue ceiling. She sat primly on the edge of an arm-chair, and kept half her attention on the door, so that when Mouse came in, she was ready for her with her most wistful and successful smile.

Mouse paused for the fraction of a second, and in that time took in that L.L. had not exaggerated the beauty, it was real, and breath-catching, just in the way an apple-tree is when it flushes into pink-tipped flowers in the spring. She also took in Flossie's clothes, the cheap materials, and the parody of the fashion, 'That'll all have to come away,' she thought. She recognised the smile, it had been a stand-by with her at the same age, before she changed it for the subtle and cynical one that she used to-day, and which she now turned on Flossie. Flossie's smile quivered under it, but it held, as she said with pinched refinement:

"How do you do? Mr. Low said you were ex-

pecting me. Lovely weather, isn't it?"

"Grand," said Mouse out loud, while to herself, she thought, 'My God! That can't be natural.' She got up and fetched the cigarette box. She offered one to Flossie, who shook her head.

"I don't smoke." She looked at Mouse, fighting her fear of her perfection, hating that, so much older, a woman could, by her mere manner and dress, make her feel so inferior. She noted with pleasure that the face before her was lined. "It seems a pity to start when you're young, don't you think? Time enough when you're older," she said softly.

Her voice and eyes were the personification of innocence, but not for a second did they deceive Mouse. 'The little cat,' she thought, 'that was a dig for me.' She lit her own cigarette and dismissed the remark with an amused uplift of her eyebrows.

"Tell me, Flossie—I shall call you Flossie, you are too young to call Miss Elk—has Mr. Low talked to you of plans?"

"He said he thought he might have a part for me in a show later on."

"You'd like that, of course?"

"Oh, I should, ever so."

"Did he tell you why he wanted you to see me?" Flossie shook her head. "There are two reasons, the first is that he wants me to see your parents and persuade them to let you have your chance, and

the second that while you're being trained, he wants you to live here."

Flossie lost her careful poise.

"Oh my!" she gasped.

Mouse saw that she was knocked endways, and her brain working like lightning, arrived at the conclusion that it was most unlikely that so much dismay was due to the thought of living with her, therefore it must be because she did not want her visiting her home.

"Your father dislikes the thought of your going on the stage, doesn't he?" she probed. "Do you think he will change his mind when he hears what a chance you have?"

"I don't know, I'm sure."

"Well, do you think it's a waste of my time going down?"

"I couldn't say, I'm sure."

"What exactly did your father say when he made you send the contract back to Mr. Low?"

Flossie twisted her hands, then she whispered:

"He didn't know I did."

"Didn't know! Then why did you send it back?"

"I don't know. I mean, I was afraid."

"Whom of?"

"Dad."

"Oh." Mouse knew she was being told a lie, but unable to place what, decided to let the matter

drop. She smiled trustingly at Flossie. "I think I'd better tell you what the plans are, for that's what I'm going to talk over with your parents. Mr. Low thinks that you can dance and sing enough for the part he has in mind, although you'll have to work at both. Your speaking voice is the trouble."

"My voice?" Flossie was honestly surprised that anything about her was open to criticism. "He never mentioned it." Her tone expressed her disbelief.

"Not to you, perhaps, but he thought it, and so did Ferdie Carme who's going to produce the show, and incidentally, so do I, so you can take it that it won't do."

"What's wrong with it?"

"At present, everything. But if you work, it can be put right, and that's why Mr. Low means you to live here; it's near Miss Myra Lynd who will take you for voice training and singing, and he thinks," she looked kindly at Flossie, "that it will be easier for you to get it right quickly if you live away from home."

Flossie wriggled her shoulders.

"If Mr. Low isn't satisfied, I don't know why he's taking all this trouble."

"He's fond of a gamble. Of course sometimes he backs the wrong horse; he may this time, but he's prepared for a risk."

"I'm sorry he thinks I'm a risk."

"My dear child, don't be offended, of course you're a risk."

"I've played big parts before without all this fuss."

"Have you?"

"Yes, when I was a kiddy. I was Cupid in the revue at——"

She stopped, for Mouse began to laugh, she laughed so much that the tears rolled down her cheeks.

"The child emetic! Baby Flora! Of course I remember you! To think I should live to meet you in the flesh."

Flossie had no idea what an emetic was, so she supposed, in spite of Mouse's laughter, that she was being complimented.

"It is a small world, isn't it?"

Mouse wiped her eyes.

"What a pity they're going to change your name. I could exhibit you like something in the Zoo, no one would believe it. Baby Flora! That's the best laugh I've been handed for years." She pulled herself together. "I'm so sorry, you'll get used to me in time. Do you think you'll like living here, supposing that I can persuade your father to let you?"

"It'll be ever so nice." Flossie's voice was full of loathing.

"Do you think about three will be a good time to catch your father and mother in?"

In front of Flossie's eyes rose the house, and the

shop, and the Fordham Road; she would have greatly preferred it if Mouse need never have seen any of them. Sitting in this flat, all queer colours and expensive brocades, she wished that she had known that Mouse meant to call, then her mother could have dusted the parlour, and put real flowers into the vase instead of the artificial ones.

"Yes, they'll be in." She looked shyly at Mouse. "You'll find it very simple after what you're used to."

Mouse grinned.

"Don't be silly. Now you ought to be off. You're lunching with Mr. Low, aren't you?"

Flossie got up. 'Mrs. Nosy Parker,' she thought, 'knows everything.' She went to the door.

"Good-bye." She looked up with a shy glance at Mouse. "I hope I come to live with you, I'd like it ever so."

Mouse grinned as the front door shut, she turned to a china dog in her fireplace. "That was the human version of ladies of your genus." She went into her bedroom calling for Mrs. Hodge, who yelled: "Comin', dear." She arrived wiping her hands on a dish-cloth.

"What a lovely young lady."

"Glad you admired her. She's probably coming to stay here for a bit."

"That'll be nice for you, havin' a bit of company. Relative, is she?"

"No, she wants somewhere to stay, and I want

help with the rent so that I needn't let the flat."

"Oh, a boarder."

"Oh God! I'm hating the thought of having her quite enough without you making things worse by calling her a boarder."

"Well, if you're a boarder you're a boarder, and no good pretending different."

Mouse unhooked her frock and pulled it over her head. Her voice came muffled from the material.

"Shut up." Her head reappeared. "Bring me in my black coat and skirt, not the new one, but the one I wear at memorial services."

Mrs. Hodge went out to the hanging cupboard in the passage; she came back with the coat and skirt, and a hopeful gleam in her eye.

"You had bad news, dear? Going to a burying?"

"No, an abduction. What old black hats have I got?"

"There's the little velvet. You look a picture in that."

"You poor cow! I said 'old hats.' I've not got so many new ones that I need to be reminded of them. Go and get that hat-box from the shelf in the bathroom, there's a dear." Mrs. Hodge fetched it, and put it on the floor. Mouse rummaged to the bottom of it, and came out triumphant. "The old felt! I'd quite forgotten I'd kept it." She pulled it on. "How do I look?"

"Not yourself at all." Mrs Hodge eyed her reminiscently. "Funny thing, do you know you put me in mind of the Care Committee lady that used to come along of young George's tonsils. Still, a bit of lip salve and that'll be a help."

"I'm hardly using any, only a spot of powder on the nose."

"You can't be well! I'll get you a cocktail. What time was you havin' lunch?"

"As soon as it's ready. Don't spare the gin, I'm going to need that cocktail."

Fanny was ironing Flossie's underclothes when she heard a car stop at the gate. 'Whatever's that?' she thought. 'Can't be the baker yet, and the milkman's been.' She put down her iron and went to the window. Mouse got out of the car, and opened the gate, and knocked on the front door. Fanny took off her apron, and smoothed her hair in front of the glass. 'Must be someone about Floss,' she thought; 'she won't half be wild at them catching me at her ironing.'

"Mrs. Elk?" Fanny fumbled between 'Miss' and 'Madam' as a form of address, so Mouse helped her. "My name's Shane, Miss Shane. I've come from Mr. Leon Low to see you and your husband about Flossie. Can I come in?" Fanny held open the door and then led the way across the kitchen to the passage at the other side, at the end of which was the

prim, Victorian, never-used parlour. Mouse suspected where she was going; the kitchen looked snug; the parlour, she was sure, would smell of beeswax and ancient Bibles. "Can't we sit in the kitchen? You're in the middle of ironing, you could get on with it while we talk."

Fanny thankfully took her hand off the parlour door-handle. Whenever she did have to sit in there, times like when the minister called, the accumulation of unlived-with objects around her made her tongue-tied; she admired the room, but she thought it very unhomely.

"Well, if you don't mind." She ushered Mouse into the kitchen, and pulled forward the armchair. She went back to her ironing. 'Floss won't half be wild if she hears,' she thought, 'but you feel less awkward with having something to do.'

Mouse fumbled for an opening remark.

"Fiddling work, ironing."

"These little things of Flossie's are; take such a time they do, she's that particular is Floss."

"Can't she do them herself?"

"Floss!" Fanny looked at Mouse and decided she could be trusted. "Her dad thinks she can, thinks she sews, too; makes it awkward sometimes with all these little scrappy silk and lace things she wears, they take such a time to make, and not being able to get on with them in front of Mr. Elk, it hangs things up."

"Can't she sew at all?"

"She can, but she never does. You couldn't expect it, could you?" There was a world of pride in Fanny's voice.

"Is Mr. Elk in?"

"In the shop he is. Do you want to see him?"

"I think it might be easier to explain things to you first. I've come, as I told you, about Flossie. She is a pretty girl."

"She is that. It's queer, for I've no looks, no more 'as Mr. Elk, and Floss 'as been lovely since the day she was born."

Mouse looking at Fanny's sagged, lined, blemished skin, and flopping figure saw no point in denying her remarks about her appearance. 'It's not so much queer,' she thought, 'it's a bloody miracle.' She came abruptly to the point.

"How do you feel about her going on the stage?"

Fanny was surprised.

"Me! Didn't Floss tell Mr. Low? It was me that put her to it in the first place." She rested on her iron, and haltingly at first, and then, helped by Mouse's sympathetic interest, with growing ease, she told of the beauty competition, and the four years while George had been away, of how hard it had been, and yet how worth while.

"It set her the right way, you see, Miss Shane. What with the pieces in the papers, and the attention she had, she got to feel she was different from

others, and though her dad made her give up workin' she's never altered, never puts her hand to a bit of house-work, like a princess she is."

"Then she hasn't worked since?"

Fanny looked round anxiously at the door into the shop, and saw it was closed.

"Well, I'll tell you something, but you mustn't mention it to Mr. Elk, no good rubbin' at an old sore. She didn't give up the dancin': her dad thought she did, but she never. Floss was too clever for him, she got round him to let her stay on at Madame's, never letting on it was the dancin' place. He thought it was just an ordinary school, you see, same as she'd been to before. Then when she came fourteen he wanted her to leave and come home and help me—you see I've always suffered with my inside since she was born—dropped, it has—so he meant well thinkin' to spare me. But Floss was ready for 'im—made you laugh to have 'eard 'er—she says she's workin' for a cookin' diploma so's she'll be a really good cook time she's married, and could she stay another two years?"

Mouse was impressed.

"A lady of resource, anyway. She ought to get on."

"Oh, she will, she's a lovely performer. Mr. Low will live to bless the day he saw her. I've got all the pieces saved they wrote about her in the paper, I'll show you after."

"Oh, but you needn't, I saw her as Cupid, I was on the stage then myself. I saw her by accident one day, and after that I took a party to the Thursday matinée every week. I thought she was unbelievable."

Fanny sighed reminiscently as she went on with her ironing.

"She did look a duck."

"What happened after the two years for the cooking diploma?"

"Well, of course, in the end she had to pretend she'd got that—Christmas it was, just after her sixteenth birthday. I remember it well, because we had a lot of snow that year and I went up to Madame's to ask what I should do about her, and I remember how cold I got in the tram. She said to let her come to a class whenever she could slip out, and then next year, that's the one we're in now, she'd try and get her a job, seein' she'd be old enough to stand up for herself with her dad. And that's how we carried on." Her body sagged with exhaustion at the memory. "My, it was a year! She always out, and her dad always on at her because she wasn't helpin' in the house. Then, just previous to her seventeenth birthday, they had a proper flare up. It came along of me not bein' so well, and Mr. Elk, he says sudden, I'm to lay up for a week and Floss could do the work. I'll never forget it to me dyin' day."

"What happened?"

"Floss forgot herself completely, and said things I knew she'd be sorry for, and finished by tellin' her dad everythin'. Well, of course, she couldn't 'ave done worse. Made her look deceitful, and me too, and Mr. Elk being a very religious-minded man, it was that upset him more'n anything. Very quiet he was, but you could see how he felt. 'Floss is not to go outside this house,' he says to me. 'Not without I say she may.' But Floss she was equal to him. 'All right,' she says, 'if you want me to stay in, I will.' And on that she goes to bed and stops there."

Mouse's face was alight with interest.

"What did Mr. Elk do about that?"

" 'Let her stop,' he says, 'she'll come down when she gets tired of 'er own company,' but she never did, she just lay there. She stayed in bed over three weeks, and the last two weeks of that she hardly ate a thing. 'I'll teach him, Mum,' she says. In the end she looked so bad we had to bring the doctor to 'er."

"What did he say?"

"Well, to begin with he can't find much wrong, says she must get up, and get out in the sun, and told me to feed her up. Then Floss says in front of her dad, could she please see the doctor alone. Course her dad couldn't refuse, and what Floss said I don't know, but the next thing was, the doctor going into the shop and telling Mr. Elk that the girl

was sufferin' from bein' kept from her art, the door through was open, so I heard him, beautiful it was what he said. Then he asks Mr. Elk to walk along with him a bit, and when he comes in, down he sits, puts 'is 'ead in 'is 'ands, and is like that close on half an hour. I fancy he asked for guidance, for in the end he says to me, 'Tell 'er she can 'ave 'er way,' and then sudden like, ' 'Is ways aren't our ways, Fan, we must just trust.' "

"Did Madame Elise send her to Mr. Low's audition?"

"That's right, said the experience would do her good, and maybe she'd get an understudy."

"Then why did she turn the job down?"

A mixture of feelings, pride in her daughter's daring, and fear that she might say the wrong thing, flickered across Fanny's face. Mouse smiled at her.

"Don't mind telling me; I won't give her away."

Fanny gave a boastful laugh.

"May as well tell you, you'll appreciate it. She comes home from the audition and says she has the job, and then she says, 'But when the contract comes, I'm sending it back.' 'Whatever for?' I said. 'I don't want any dirty old chorus job,' she says, 'I been a star and I mean to go on being one.' So I said, 'But Madame said you'd 'ave to make a fresh start.' 'Madame's wrong,' she says, 'I saw the way Mr. Low looked at me. If I send that contract back I'll get another, and it won't be for the chorus.' "

Mouse was surprised, she had no idea that the Flossie she had met had such skilled guile in her. A bitch, and a foolish bitch, was how she had placed her. How wrong she had been. Foolish!

"That girl'll go far. She's perfectly right, Mrs. Elk, that's what happened. Mr. Low saw her, and naturally spotted that she was amazingly pretty, and when she sent the contract back, he sent for her as you know, and the result is there is a chance, a marvellous chance for her in about six months' time."

Fanny had finished ironing, and was folding the clothes, she stopped and looked out of the window.

"Seems silly, Miss Shane, but I knew this day was comin'. Years ago it was I first knew it, Floss was swingin' on that gate. I can see her as if it was to-day. The teacher from the school had been worrying Mr. Elk, it was on account of Flossie's looks—jealous, I reckon, her being like the back of a cab. After she'd gone, I looked out of that window; Floss was swingin' on the gate, she had on a little red coat I'd made her, and a red cap, she looked a picture, and I knew then as sure as I stand here how things would be for her."

Mouse looked at Fanny. This interview was not a bit as she had imagined it, she felt a growing inclination not to grab Flossie for L.L. but to protect this silly little mother.

"There's one hitch," she said sharply, calling

Fanny back from castle-building, "her speaking voice is wrong."

"Her voice!" Fanny's amazement was even greater than Flossie's had been. "She's always spoke so nice, the neighbours often mention it, and she's always been to her elocution at Madame's of a Saturday."

"It is wrong, though. But Mr. Low has thought of a way to get it right. He's sending her to Miss Lynd for voice production and singing, and she's wonderful, but that won't be enough." How she detested her mission, she had not realised how difficult this part of it would be. Her voice was apologetic. "He wants her to come and stay with me."

"Leave home! Whatever for?"

Mouse got up and came to the table, and embarrassed Fanny by patting her hand.

"Only just while she's training; when she's got the job, she can live where she likes. You see it's important that she should be corrected all the time, not only while she's at her classes."

There was a pause. Then Fanny pulled herself together.

"Of course, that's quite right. Me and Mr. Elk, we couldn't help her. Just for a moment I felt upset; you see, she's never been away from me not for a day, and she's such a mother's girl."

"She'll come home for the week-ends. I'm usually away, so she'd have to, anyhow."

"And when she's workin' she can come back home, or maybe she'll want us to move up West End a bit." She looked at the door through to the shop. "Listen to me running on, but I've got all excited. I was forgettin' her dad doesn't know. I don't know what he'll say. Course he said she might go on the stage, but live away from home!—He's in there," she jerked her head to indicate George, "you go in and have a talk with him, and I'll put on the kettle and get you a cup of tea."

There were no customers in the shop, so George was reading *The Smallholder*. He got up when Mouse came in.

"Good afternoon." He did not add anything about 'What can I do for you?' because customers never came through the house door, and Mouse did not look like his sort of customer anyway. Mouse saw there was not a chair, but there was an up-ended wooden box, so she sat on it.

"Mr. Elk, I'm here on behalf of a theatre manager about Flossie."

"Ah!" He folded *The Smallholder* and put it away behind the till, and faced Mouse, leaning himself against some boxes of oranges.

"I hear you have given your consent to her going on the stage."

"In a manner of speaking I have." He picked up an orange and weighed it thoughtfully in his hand. "The stage, Miss, may be all right for some, but for

those who know different it's a sin. Mind you, theatrical performances are all right, I used to take Mrs. Elk when we was first married, but that don't mean that I want a daughter of mine makin' a show of 'erself. Maybe, born to it as some are, it's what God intended, but it's not what was meant for Floss."

"She started young. I suppose it's become a habit with her."

"That's just it. Mrs. Elk put her to it when I was away, and it was a showin' it was wrong the way it made them both act deceitful."

"But you're going to let her do it?"

George jerked his head back towards the kitchen.

"You been talkin' to Mrs. Elk?" Mouse nodded. "Then she'll 'ave told you all about the doctor and that. I've 'ad to give my consent, but it goes against me."

"Now that you have given it, I suppose you'd like her to do well, wouldn't you?"

George considered.

"Yes. If a thing's goin' to be done, may as well be done well."

"There's a chance for Flossie to step right to the top straight away."

George shook his head.

"That's all wrong. Whatever you do you ought to work up to it. Makin' things too easy won't help her."

"You're wrong there, Mr. Elk. I know the theatre. It's a help to get a chance right away, but it's not all jam. Having started at the top you've got to stop there, and that means work, and work, and work, and never let up for a minute. It isn't the getting there that's difficult, it's the stopping there."

There was a pause, and then George said in surprise:

"That's right, that is. I know with my onions. I got a piece of land I rent, Cheshunt way it is, and three years back I took a first for 'em at the show; these last two years I only got a second, this year I've tried a new way and I reckon I'll take the first again."

Mouse laughed.

"Taking Flossie as an onion, that's exactly what I mean. But what I've come about is her training." She looked anxiously at George, he did not look a touchy man. "Her accent's bad."

"Very like," he agreed mildly. "We're common people."

She saw he had spoken quite simply, as one who preferred facts. Her heart warmed to him.

"They think if she was away from this part of the world for a bit, she'd get it right. I've asked her to come and stay with me. It isn't only the accent, I can help her in lots of ways. She'd be home for week-ends, of course, and you could come up first

and see where I live. I'll look after her, you needn't worry."

"You told 'er mother what you come about?"

"Yes."

"What she say?"

"That it's up to you."

He went to the corner behind the door and brought out another box, he put it down facing Mouse and tapped her knee.

"Look here, miss, you look to me one I can talk to. I'm not thinkin' so much of Floss, it's Mrs. Elk. Floss wants to do this dancin' and that and I can't stop 'er. But the day she leaves this 'ouse she's gone for good. Mrs. Elk doesn't see that."

"I don't see that——" Mouse began.

George stopped her politely.

"If you'll excuse me, miss, you do. Do you think when she's been living in your flat along of you that she's comin' back to 'er mother? No."

"I live very simply."

"Your simple isn't our simple. What's right for you isn't right for us. It's going against what's intended. We was put down where we was meant to stay."

"Good gracious! That would kill all ambition."

"No, it wouldn't. It's open to all to make a success of their lives, but 'avin' made it there's no reason to go changin' all your 'abits to live like your betters. Take me, what would I do if I made a fortune?"

"I don't know."

"Stop right here in the Fordham Road, and carry on same as I always done."

"Mrs. Elk would have something to say about that."

"No. She talks silly at times, very silly, but she wouldn't want things different, except maybe some help in the 'ouse on account of 'er sufferin' with her stomach."

"I wonder. I quite hope you won't make the fortune, then you won't be disappointed. But Flossie, you mean, is bound to move into another world."

"That's right, and I wrestled in prayer a lot about it. I took my time before I said 'Yes' even after the doctor said she should be given her own way. I said to Mrs. Elk, 'That's what Doctor wants, but what does God want?' and I prayed, and while I was prayin' I got my answer. All of us is meant to bear burdens, and Floss was given to Mrs. Elk and me as the burden we got to bear. Mrs. Elk she don't see it, Floss is all she's got, and she don't see that encouragin' 'er with this dancin' she'll lose 'er. I don't mind 'er going to live with you, miss, it's good of you to offer. But it's for Mrs. Elk to say. I'll call 'er." He opened the door. "Fan." Fanny came in, looking anxiously at George. He nodded at Mouse. "You heard what this lady come about. Are you willin' for Floss to live away?"

Fanny nodded.

"It's only middle weeks, she'll be home week-ends."

"At first she will, but you mark my words, it's the beginnin' of the end; the day she leaves here, she leaves for good."

"You old silly." Fanny smiling, turned to Mouse. "Listen to him, he doesn't know much about girls. Floss'll always want her mum."

George shrugged his shoulders hopelessly.

"You're willin' then she shall go and stay with this lady?"

"If it's for the best I am." She turned to Mouse. "If you'll come in, miss, I've a cup of tea ready for you."

CHAPTER X

MYRA LYND was born Myra Smith, in a caravan attached to a small circus. Her gipsy father, Rube Smith, who combined the jobs of first tent hand and drum player, had cut himself off from his own people when he had married a gajo. Her mother, a disheartened creature, was the daughter of a small farmer who had lost all her background by her marriage. When she was not having a baby she did odd jobs, taking the door money, and selling photographs. There were innumerable small Smiths, combining in various ways the flaxen hair and china-blue eyes of their mother and the swarthy colouring of their father. Myra, called after the bareback rider who had acted as midwife at her birth, was entirely gipsy outwardly, but inwardly had much in her of her mother's family. Somehow she possessed a love of decency, law, and order, she disliked the filth and squalor in which they lived, she knew there were better things somewhere, and she meant to find them. Habit might have blunted her sensibilities, but fate helped her, she developed a singing voice. Her talent was soon discovered by the circus people, always on the look-out for means of making the children profitable, and they did their

best to ruin any chances her voice might have had, by putting her into the ring at the age of eight to yell ballads over the blare of the small, but very noisy, band. However, just before her ninth birthday the circus came to Cornwall and played for a night near an artist community. The artists, bored by bad weather which had stopped them working, came in a body bringing with them such guests as they had staying at the time. Among the guests was Gerald Lynd. Gerald had inherited a fortune from an energetic grandfather, it had been made in rubies and then invested over half Europe. He had no particular interest in rubies, so made no effort to find any more, but instead spent the money on music which he loved. He heard Myra sing, and without a word to his party went to the back of the circus, and learning that her father was the man with the drum, waited until he was free and made an offer of fifty pounds for her. He did not mention her voice, and heaven alone knows for what purpose her parents supposed they were selling her when later the same evening they agreed to part with her outright for a hundred pounds cash. Naturally Gerald had not that much money on him, but he raised it by loans from the community, and a cheque cashed at the public-house, and early the next morning the circus and all her family moved out of Myra's life for ever. She watched them depart from the window of an attic bedroom in the house

of one of the artists, and as the last wagon lurched out of sight she gave a sharp sigh of happiness. She remained that summer with the artists, and when she was not being used as a model, spent her time in the sea, and she filled out a little, and became even browner than usual, and very merry. When the winter came Gerald took her up to his house in Mount Street, and got her a governess, and himself gave her lessons in the theory of music. She was not allowed to sing a note. She proved quick and receptive, and she was a hard worker, for she was conscious from the beginning that the continuation of this glorious change in her fortunes depended on her voice. Gerald never grew fond of her as a person, but devoted to her from a musician's angle. He grew ambitious for her. "I must take Myra to Germany," he said to his friend Cyril who was acting as his secretary. "Could you bear to live in Germany for a bit?" Cyril could bear to live anywhere where he lived free, so later the three of them made their headquarters in Leipzig where Myra had a German governess and was allowed to speak only her language, and from where, every week or two, they motored to other towns for the opera or a concert which she had to criticise with intelligence, in German. A year later they moved to Paris. "That's enough of Germany for a bit," Gerald said. "Myra will come back later to study. It's time she spoke French." They stayed in France two years, and Myra

had a French governess and life was exactly as it had been in Germany except that she spoke nothing but French except on Sundays when she spoke only German. Paris is not a place in which you can live without being seen, and Myra by now being thirteen, Gerald's friends came back to England and talked. "I saw Gerald in Paris with that little girl he's adopted. Extraordinary ménage!" "Something ought to be done about that child Gerald's got hold of; most unsuitable!" "Well, she's safe enough with those two!" "Safe! But what ideas is she picking up?" The gossip grew and finally reached the ears of Gerald's aunt. Up to that moment all that needed excusing about Gerald had been excused on the ground that he was a musician. "Artists always are queer." But the aunt thought this last talk a bit much. Little girls indeed! She wrote a tactful letter suggesting that a girl of fourteen would be better in a school. Gerald replied that Myra was thirteen, not fourteen, and that he was educating her too divinely. However, he was tired of Paris and wanted to reopen his London house, and above all he was sick to death of Cyril and needed an excuse to shake him off, so he packed Myra off to a convent outside Milan, stipulating that she still keep up her French and German, and he gave Cyril a nice lump sum as a parting present, and took a new secretary called Tony. Cyril cried a good deal, otherwise everybody was pleased. At sixteen

Myra went back to Germany and started her training; she had an unusual-shaped throat, and it produced a magnificent contralto voice which in smooth passages made you think of cream coming out of a churn. When she had been training for a year, Gerald came over to hear her, and was moved to tears, and went home and made a will leaving her all his personal money; the bulk of the ruby fortune was entailed, or he would have left her that too. Two years later she made her first appearance in England: it was at a party given by immensely rich and influential musical Jews. She left the audience gasping, Gerald had not prepared them for how beautiful the voice was, he thought it better that there should be an element of surprise. The excitement was greater than he had hoped, his hand was nearly wrung off, his shoulders sore from pats, and he and Felix, who had replaced Tony as his secretary, took Myra home in triumph, and they had a little party when they got in, and lived again every moment of the evening, the expression on so-and-so's face, the jealousy of somebody else, then they drank Myra's health and kissed her hands and packed her off to bed. That was July, and Gerald said that Myra must have a holiday until September and that she should choose how it should be spent. Her choice was the Mediterranean. Gerald groaned. It would, he said, be terribly hot; still, she should have her way, he'd charter a small

yacht and since they were going to be in the Mediterranean they would have a look at Greece as she should be Felix's spiritual home. Ashore for the day at Samos, they all caught diphtheria. They lay in their cabins supposing at first they had Mediterranean throats, and by the time Gerald's man, who was acting nurse, realised they had something worse and sent ashore for a doctor, Felix was dead, Gerald dying, and only Myra with her sturdy gipsy blood could be saved. She and three members of the crew who had caught the disease, were rushed ashore to the isolation hospital, where, just in time, they operated on Myra's throat. In operating they ruined her vocal chords. It was Gerald's aunt who came to her rescue. Not only did she fetch the girl back from Greece, but showed her how to make the best of what was left of her voice. Her unfailing flair for things social told her that Myra should make the most of her gipsy stock, dress in exaggerated colours, and hang herself with beads. Then, too, she should take Gerald's name, just now the tragedy was fresh in people's memories; later, without the constant reminder, they might forget who she was. "Now, my dear," she said, "you are a figure of interest in musical London, snatch at your opportunity, let it be known you will, at a price, take pupils." The result was greater than could be hoped. Myra made no effort to catch the real singer, but fixed her eye on those who wished to shine in

musical comedy. In time she held a remarkable position, she discovered in herself a real flair for teaching and still more a real flair for spreading helpful gossip in the right quarters. Bizarre, racy, amusing, and very knowledgeable, she was a great figure in London.

Flossie was one of a long string of little nobodies with ghastly accents and a bit of voice who had been given to Myra to make something of. She was sitting at the piano when the girl was shown in to her studio. She had become fat, she was wearing a purple dress, she had a cerise shawl thrown round her shoulders, long ear-rings swung from her ears, and half a dozen rows of beads from her neck, her brown hands glittered with rings.

"Oh my!" thought Flossie. "A gyppo."

Myra's tired, worldly, amusement-glutted eyes travelled over Flossie, and she recalled her tenting days, a wet spring, and one morning seeing a laburnum exquisitely gold, shining through a fog. She struck three soft chords, a wordless tribute to perfection.

"Come here," she said gently. She played a scale. "Sing that." She listened and squirmed. "My good child, you have a roof to your mouth, spare your throat. Say ah, ay, ee, oh, eu." Flossie said them. "Tra la la la," Myra sang. Years of teaching had made it a habit with her to express herself with a few notes, "Cockney prunes and prisms! Take off

your hat and coat. "Me, me, me, me, me. Now stand there. You're going to work as you never worked before."

"Lightly, Flossie, lightly, don't let me hear your feet. Now a Pas de Basque. One two. One two. And again, Connie dear. And again."

Madame herself came in to watch the classes.

"Mus' work, Flossie. Mus' work. Mus' work."

Muriel, knowing of the chance to be given to Flossie, tried to identify herself with her. Technique up to a point she could give to anyone. But that something more. She must try and pass that on. There could never be success for herself such as she had once dreamed of, but success could come through her labour. "Don't you think, dear," she said daily, "that you'll stay as good as you are now without working. You'll never be able to miss a day's practice. You're improved, I don't deny it, and you'll stay improved just so long as you work. Now let's have those pirouettes once more. Neat finish. That's better. And again, Connie dear. And again."

"I do wish I might go to the pictures some night instead of to the theatre, I'm tired of seeing all this acting."

"L.L. thinks listening to the voices good for you."

"My goodness! I'd say I heard enough of listening to voices with Miss Lynd ah-ay-eeing. Aren't you taking me?"

"No. Miss Brown is. Why that face? She's a very nice girl."

"I suppose so, as secretaries go. But she's dull. Never talks about really interesting things. Wouldn't you think working for a man like L.L. she'd have heaps to say; he's supposed to have carried on with I don't know who."

"He has. You need to watch your step with him."

"Not very nice, is it? But I suppose he wouldn't try it on with a young girl like me."

Mouse laughed.

"If he did, I'd say you could look after yourself."

"That's right. I'll never be one to allow fellows to take liberties."

"Not 'fellows,' my lamb. You better go and change, dinner won't be long."

Flossie got up, she collected her hat and bag. She looked aggravatingly at Mouse.

"I suppose you aren't taking me because that gentleman friend of yours is coming again."

Mouse raised her eyebrows.

"Never 'gentleman,' my sweet, the word suggests that you think you have social superiors, you have to learn you have none. That shouldn't be difficult to you. Jim Menton's coming, I suppose that's the

man you're talking about. I didn't know you'd seen him."

"I haven't, but I knew somebody'd been, I saw the end of a cigar one day, and most nights when I come in, there've been two glasses used. Not very nice a gentleman, I mean a man, visiting a single lady."

"All my remarks about 'gentlemen' concern 'ladies,' there are none unless you happen to be referring to the aged. As regards Jim visiting me, my dear Watson, I shouldn't worry if I were you, he's been coming to see me so long that it's become respectable by habit. Anyway, I'm almost at the parrot-and-black-cat stage of spinsterdom, so I think I can take care of myself. Now do go and dress."

Flossie looked at her knowingly.

"In a hurry to be rid of me, aren't you?"

Jim rang the bell. Mrs. Hodge had gone, so Mouse opened the door.

"Hullo, sweet. How was Leeds? The Virgin Queen says it isn't nice your visiting what she describes as 'a single lady.'"

Jim poured out two whiskies.

"Little tick. How's she progressing?"

"Marvellously. The girl's a human chameleon, literally she changes with her background. If you put her down in Buckingham Palace she'd have all the etiquette in a couple of days, and be telling

the ladies-in-waiting what to do next."

"Liking her any better?"

"No. She's an inhuman little toad. But I take off my hat to her, it's no joke being shoved down in a strange flat with a strange woman, everything different to everything she knows, and me correcting her every time she opens her mouth. She's keeping her end up marvellously. You should hear her with Mrs. Hodge, none of the familiarity there is between Mrs. Hodge and me; to Flossie she's a servant and nothing else, and she never lets her forget it. I shock her terribly. She reproved me yesterday and told me that those beneath us need keeping in their places."

"How's L.L. behaving?"

"Perfectly. He never gets a chance to do anything else, and, mind you, if he did make a pass at her, I'm sure he'd have no luck, she's terribly respectable."

"Takes after Nonconformist Pa."

"I won't have you laugh at Mr. Elk, he's a darling, and he's asked me to come and see his allotment near Cheshunt. When he came to see the flat, he brought me apples he'd grown himself, he's the only man I know who does that for me."

"I seem to remember baskets of figs and grapes, and a melon or two."

"Grown by you? Tell me another funny story."

Jim came over to the sofa.

"Move up and make room." He lay down beside her. "Enough of the Virgin Elk and Father Elk, and all the Elks. Oh, Mouse, I did hate Leeds and I was wanting you so terribly."

"Were you, my sweet?" Her head wriggled into his neck. "Oddly enough I missed you. Five days is a hell of a time."

L.L. called a conference at his office, Ferdie Carme, Mouse, Myra, and Madame, who arrived late, with an astounding velvet toque popped rakishly on her wig, and her ballet shoes replaced by buff kid button boots.

"I've got to put up the notice for 'Love in Spring,'" L.L. explained. "I thought it might weather August, but it won't. That means 'Looby' for about the third week in September. What do you all think of the girl?"

There was a pause. Ferdie Carme, who had been gazing at the ceiling, looked round at them all. He was a small man with a yellow face, he never smiled, he made the worst of himself by living in pullovers of shades guaranteed to accentuate the biliousness of his colouring.

"You can speak up," he prompted, "you're among friends."

"Tra la la la la la la la," sang Myra, "she'll do. Mediocre talents, but a face like spring."

L.L. turned to Madame.

"What do you say?"

"Sharp chil', sharp chil', sharp chil'. She'll do, she'll do, she'll do."

L.L. collected eyes. "Let's say it's fixed then. She plays 'Looby.' Now what about her name? Miss Shane lunched with me to-day and gave me an idea, and I'd like to know how it strikes all of you. It seems she's nicknamed her 'The Virgin Queen,' so I thought just one name, 'Virginia.' Just the one word, what do you think?"

"All innocence and dew," Mouse explained.

"Hey nonny nonny nonny," Myra chirruped, "what could be sweeter for a young girl."

Ferdie helped himself to a cigar from a box on the desk.

"First time I ever heard of virginity being advertised as an attraction. Still it might be a novelty."

"Sing hey. Sing ho. Sing—I've an idea," Myra beamed at them. "I'll spread one of my little stories. L.L. found the child in a convent, she's never seen anything but a nun."

Ferdie shook his head.

"How'd L.L. get in a convent?"

"How did Flossie get there if it comes to that?" asked Mouse.

"Virginia," L.L. expostulated. "Must try and remember to call her that."

"Pom de doodle. Pom de doodle," Myra con-

ducted herself with one finger. "I've got it. A little royal mistake."

Ferdie sighed.

"What sort of royalty? Very few left. Easy to become personal."

"She can't speak any languages," Mouse pointed out. "Better be careful."

"Well, I don't know that that matters." Ferdie laid some ash on the carpet. "Can't really speak English, if she comes to that."

Myra was thinking ahead.

"Me, me, me, me, me. We'll never say which royalty. I'll just whisper it around that L.L. has found somebody with a terribly interesting history and the nuns say that there was a crown embroidered on her baby clothes."

Ferdie groaned.

"That 'found in the basket on the convent steps' gag has been worked to death."

L.L. stretched out his legs and looked in a satisfied way at them all.

"It'll work again. With a kid looking like that, anything'd work." He turned to Mouse. "Could you coach her up to a few royal touches, do you think? Not too much, you know the sort of thing."

"And she might teach her that she's a virgin," Ferdie suggested.

Mouse giggled.

"Don't worry about that, Ferdie, she is. As for

the royalty stuff, she'll be so royal in a couple of days, she'll have you all getting up when she comes into a room, and me doing a curtsy. But in Myra's beautiful story there's one flaw you've all overlooked. She's got a real father and mother."

"Oh God!" Ferdie moaned. "It's the silliest thing why these girls never think to be orphans."

"Ah ah ah ah ah ah ah ah."

"Let's have this one without music," Ferdie suggested. "Got an idea, darling?"

"Yes." Myra's ear-rings shook with excitement. "The parents are old retainers, who always loved the child, and they took her to the convent for safety."

Ferdie gave Mouse a sorrowful wink.

"What language do the old retainers speak, Myra?"

Mouse lit a cigarette.

"There are a few more dear old stories we have not yet exhumed. Deaf and dumb peasants with their tongues cut out because they wouldn't betray their royal masters, for instance. Now do listen to your Auntie Mouse, a minute. Let Myra put over any story she likes, she'll have no difficulty with Flossie—Virginia, I mean—she'd drop her parents to-day if anyone told her it would be a good thing to do. But the parents won't be so easy. She's got a rather silly mother who worships her, and a divine Nonconformist father who is determined to save her immortal soul."

"So are we," Ferdie argued; "aren't we calling her Virginia to show the sort of girl we think she is?"

"Do do do do do do do do," Myra paused at the top of the scale. "When the girl learns she needs to get rid of her parents she'll do it herself. She's got no heart."

"Tha's ri'. Tha's ri'. Tha's ri'," Madame agreed.

L.L. disliked the turn the conference had taken. His finds were always flawless until such time as he found their cracks for himself. He got up.

"I needn't keep any of you then. Everything's fixed. We'll begin rehearsals in about three weeks, and meanwhile Myra will start her story round, and Mouse'll get the girl put up to it."

"And L.L. will find out if the name's a mistake or not," Ferdie whispered to Mouse.

CHAPTER XI

TWENTY-FOUR hours before the curtain rang up on 'Looby,' there was a queue forming for the pit and gallery. A Leon Low production was always an excitement. With Leon Low you could be certain of getting so much for your money. Lavish was an inadequate word to use in connection with him, he needed a new one coined specially for him. His entertainments never presented one or two stars, but a Great Bear and Milky Way of them, and never a star on the wane, but always stars at their brightest or in the ascendant. It was said of Leon Low that no new actor or actress could make a success overnight, but he had them signed up before breakfast the next morning. It was what he called giving new talent a 'break.' He seldom had the right parts for the new talent, so mis-casting frequently broke them for ever, but he never noticed failures, he had a gift for seeing nothing but success. He had an all-observing international eye. He never put on a show without a foreign find to display. An exquisite body from Mexico, a wonderful tenor voice picked up in an Italian gutter, a gipsy dancer from Spain, the loveliest legs in the world from Java, nothing missed him, he signed them all on, and somehow

squeezed them into his next production. He had another trait peculiarly endearing to his public, he never used a makeshift if it was possible to get hold of the real thing. Should he show a mountain-side it might be made of cardboard, but at least you could be sure that the edelweiss were honest flowers, and you could read in your paper how many of them the real goat had tried to eat. When he needed waterfalls, not only were they falls of real water, but all his fans, who read their theatre gossip columns, knew exactly how many tons of water were used per night, and how far it dropped, and how the overflow was carried away. If food had to be eaten in a Leon Low production, no miserable banana appeared pretending to be fish, but an honest-to-God four-course dinner was eaten in front of the audience, each one of whom could, had they read their papers, have known what was on the menu and to please which member of the cast each dish was chosen. When it came to matters of dress and décor he stood alone. He had an excellent flair himself in these matters, but he used it only to make suggestions to the brilliant witty people he got round him. Frequently, to the serious critic, the mounting of the Low shows was the one bright spot in a tedious evening.

'Looby' had all the ingredients which had carried previous shows to success. The dresses and décor were in the hands of Derek Dauncey, a man whose

sex life had its only outlet in designing for the stage, and quite a lot of the dresses gave just that impression. For realism the waltz number, 'There's a Rainbow Tying my Heart to Yours,' had a real rainbow. No coloured beams of light thrown across the stage, but a rainbow was to be made just as heaven made rainbows. In the flies there was to be a large revolving sun throwing its rays on to a sheet of falling water from which would reflect a great natural arc across the stage. It was no wonder the public were faithful to a man who could give them real things like that. Helen Day, who had sung her way into thousands of hearts, had the leading role. She played the Princess who stole her soldier lover from little Looby the peasant girl, stole, that is to say, to the extent of singing to him, and with him, 'There's a Rainbow Tying my Heart to Yours' three times during the evening as well as various other numbers in his praise, including one to her massed regiments assembled outside the palace gates. Bobby Kite was the soldier. Bobby had not long reached front rank, but the moment he reached it he had become just 'Bobby' to a vast public. He had blue eyes with just the right sort of twinkle, a figure like a Greek god, and a shy smile which made all his fans gasp, 'Isn't he sweet.' Incidentally he had a really fine singing voice. The comedian was Billy Brooks. Billy had, for several years, been such a draw on the halls that when he

was on the programme no other star turn was needed, he filled the place by himself and could be supported by the second-rate. The figure L.L. had to pay to lure him into 'Looby' meant that he could not afford one bad week throughout the run. The lesser non-singing parts, Looby's parents and a Grand Duke and Duchess, were given to well-known straight actors and actresses. These people brought to their few scenes such sincerity that it was as if an east wind blew through the sensuous atmosphere, but their appearances were so short that before they had time to annoy, they were gone, and the audience enjoying what followed the better for the titillation of reality. For foreign finds there were a Nubian whose contortions must make any but the most hard-boiled feel sick, and a dancer from Peru whose stomach muscles were advertised as having amazed the entire medical profession. But, of course, the star discovery was L.L.'s amazing find 'Virginia.' The name sparkled in coloured lights over the door, and it pleased the public to see it there; they had heard such a lot about the girl, they almost felt they knew her.

Before seven the cast began to arrive. Helen Day was the first, she always arranged to arrive just before the gallery doors opened so that she could give her girls a smile and a word. She was lying back in her car, her face a blank until it turned into

the back street leading to the stage door, then she sat up wreathed in smiles. She had almost to push her way through the crowd, there was so much handkerchief-waving, and small presents and cries of 'Good luck, Miss Day,' 'Make a big success to-night, Miss Day.' She gave time to them all, she knew just how much remembering the names of her chief adorers was worth, how it made their hearts glow to hear her say, "Thank you, Elsie, I always count on your black cats to bring me luck." "Hullo, Maisie, my sprig of white heather? Bless you." How later, sitting on the intolerably hard benches which was all the theatre provided for her most faithful followers, Elsie and Maisie would forget the fatigue of their long hours of waiting in the knowledge that they would see the goddess who had remembered their names and even kissed them, and would have a chance to lengthen, if only by a fragment, the enormous round of applause which would greet her entrance. In the shelter of the hall, she greeted Edwards the doorkeeper with a mechanical smile, then hurried up the stairs. Her dressing-room was full of flowers, but she did not see them. She shut the door, then huddled into an armchair shaking as if she had malaria, and retching until the perspiration stood in beads on her forehead. Her dresser gave one look at her, then hurriedly poured a few drops out of a medicine bottle into a glass of water, and came over and knelt beside her patting her hand.

"Now, dear. Now. You haven't done this lately. Drink some of this."

Helen spoke in gasps through her rattling teeth.

"I know. It's the new girl, I think. Inexperienced people always have made me nervous. Oh God! I must be sick."

The dresser lifted the glass to her lips.

"No, dear, you won't be. It's just this retching, it'll go off, it always does. Come on, drink down your medicine and you'll be fine in five minutes."

There was a tap on the door and Ferdie put his head round.

"Just come to wish you luck, Helen." He looked at her and raised his eyebrows. He took the glass from the dresser. "Come on, old girl, drink this or I'll force your mouth open and pour it down."

Little by little as the medicine took effect, the shivers and nausea died away. Helen looked up and smiled feebly.

"Sorry, Ferdie, you shouldn't have come in then, I haven't done this for ages, I hoped I'd outgrown it."

Ferdie got up.

"I should take it easy a bit before you make up. It's Virginia, I suppose?" She nodded. "How can you be so stupid? That girl would do her stuff if the theatre fell down. You ought to have to try and be God and make a real rainbow with a real sun and real water, then you would have something to worry

about. So long, I'll be seeing you."

Bobby Kite came hurrying up the passage with a large box under his arm.

"Miss Virginia in yet?" he asked Roberts, his dresser.

"No, Mr. Kite, I don't think so, her door's open and Mrs. Jones is standing in the passage."

"Well, take this box along to her and tell her it's roses for Miss Virginia," he blushed, "and pretend to open a bundle of telegrams. Oh, and tell her to put them in water on the dressing-table."

Roberts closed the door and took the box down the passage. He winked as he gave them to Mrs. Jones.

"To be put in water on the dressing-table," he jerked his head back at Bobby's door. "We've fallen for your royalty."

Mrs. Jones sniffed.

"Royal is as royal does, Mr. Roberts."

Virginia arrived after the gallery had gone in, but there were a few people standing round the stage door. They nudged and 'Ooh'd' and 'Ah'd' as she went by, but they were not sure enough of her from her pictures to address her by name. She swept by Edwards with an imperial nod and went up to her dressing-room. Mrs. Jones had finished arranging the roses.

"Good evening, Miss Virginia. Mr. Kite sent these in for you."

Flossie looked at the roses, and at L.L.'s magnificent basket of flowers on the floor, and to Myra's and Mouse's handsome bouquets in the basin, and smiled, and then spotted a little pot of white heather with a silver bow standing on the dressing-table. It had a letter attached; her mouth turned down at the corners, she guessed whom it was from even before she opened the envelope.

Dear Floss this is just to wish you every success to-night dear Miss Shane having kindly written to explain how you could not get tickets for the first night which I quite understand hoping to see you to-morrow as Miss Shane said you thought of coming your loving Mum. This bit of white heather is for luck.

Flossie tore up the letter and threw it in the paper basket.

"Dresser," she said, as she sat down at her dressing-table, "would you like that pot of heather? I don't want it."

Gloria Grieve bounded in at the stage door.

"Good evening, Edwards. Virginia in?"

"Yes, miss."

"Not looking ill, I suppose?"

"No, miss. I don't think you'll be going on to-night."

She leant through the hatch to him, her red curls

falling over her face.

"Are you a religious man, Edwards?"

"Why, miss?"

"Because if you are, I thought perhaps you'd pray for a little accident, nothing awful, just a sprained ankle would do. I'm very good as Looby."

Edwards grinned.

"You'll get your chance one day."

She moved away, her step less bounding than when she had come in.

"I've said that for nearly five years."

"Overture and beginners, please."

Even in the understudy's room that call brought a shiver.

"Good luck, Helen. Good luck, Bobby. Good luck, Virginia."

The stage manager stepped over to the chorus who were waiting in a line for their first entrance.

"Keep it going, girls, and don't let the boy have to call any of you twice; you're practically in the nude, so no good telling me you couldn't manage the change." He looked at his watch, went back to the prompt corner. "Clear, please." He pressed a button. The house lights dimmed, the conductor raised his baton, the stage lights went up. He pressed another button, and the curtain rose.

The curtain fell on the first act. Jim smiled at Mouse and Jasmine.

"Fine, isn't it? My word, Mouse, the Virgin Queen's a peach."

Jasmine got up.

"I call her frightful. Let's go and smoke. Circe, that's what she ought to be called. One day she'll turn you into a pig, Mouse, you better be careful."

Mouse followed her outside.

"You must admit she's beautiful."

Jasmine ignored the cameras gathering round her, as 'One of the loveliest of this year's Debs' and then as 'One of the most attractive of the young marrieds' and finally as 'Lady Menton, one of our smartest hostesses'; she was used to cameras.

"Beautiful?" She stammered slightly, a way she had when she was thinking while she spoke. "I don't think beautiful's like that. You're beautiful, Mouse. What she's got isn't beauty."

Mouse flushed, it was unlike Jasmine to pay compliments.

"Beautiful or not, she looked a treat in that dress," Jim broke in.

Mouse looked at Jasmine, they both smiled. The dress had been such a masterpiece, so veiling, and yet so revealing in the few places that mattered.

"I should think," Jasmine stammered, "that Derek Dauncey had one of his most successful love affairs with that frock."

George Fall and Eric Barr, theatrical critics, gave each other a look which meant "What about one?"

They fought for a couple of whiskies and sodas and carried them to a corner of the bar. George looked at Eric.

"What d'you think about it?"

Eric looked at his drink.

"You know L.L. really is a remarkable fellow. Every time he puts on a show I say to myself, 'Can't let him get away with his muck this time,' and then I go home and write 'Leon Low has done it again.'"

"That's right," George agreed. "You can't help it; sitting through one of his productions is just a way of getting tight. The girls are butes, the music's pure syrup, you get completely maudlin, and then on bounds a genius like Billy Brooks who'd make a corpse laugh, and by the time you write the thing up you're not responsible. All the same I don't think he can get away with his little bit of royal sex appeal."

Eric stared at him.

"Man, you've never swallowed that bait? Oh dear, dear, dear, it's a shame how they fool our poor innocent critics."

"Isn't she royal?"

"Just as royal as you'd expect, born at the back of a greengrocer's shop in the Fordham Road, S.E."

"But those are adopted parents, I heard."

"Go on, tell me the whole story, not forgetting the convent. I'll believe you."

"Where'd the rumour start then? Myra?"

"Course."

"Fordham Road. Greengrocer. I'll give the kid a write up then, I like to see somebody who begins nowhere get a break."

It was in the last act when dressed in white and rose-pink, with a flower trailing from one hand, and innocence and sweetness in every line of her, singing with Bobby, 'Little Girl Loves Little Boy,' that the audience completely took Flossie to their hearts. She had been told to look down at first and then, as the song progressed, slowly to raise her eyes to Bobby. She had been raising her eyes just like that all her life, she could not do it wrong. "Delicious, isn't she?" said the stalls. "Breeding always tells." "I would like to know who the father was," sighed the pit; "wouldn't he be proud if he could see her now." The dress circle whispered behind its hand: "Can you see whom she's like? Just that same fascinating smile. Of course that's who it is." The gallery, past speech, gurgled: "Isn't she sweet! Don't she and Bobby make a lovely pair."

L.L. brought a crowd of people round afterwards. He introduced them. "This is Virginia," with a slight, carefully rehearsed air of deference. Flossie, well trained by Mouse, smiled and thanked for compliments with an aloof air which was perfect.

L.L. went outside and found Ferdie.

"We've done it, boy. The girl's got 'em all by the short hairs."

Ferdie looked depressed.

"That's right. But this royal stuff's getting me down. I go to her room to say 'Well done,' and raise my arm to slap her backside, and only just in time I remember and kiss her hand instead. Tiring, that's what it is."

CHAPTER XII

"Oh, miss, are you awake? It's goin' on 'alf-past ten, and I thought— Oh, miss, have you seen the papers?"

Mouse opened one eye and stared sleepily at Mrs. Hodge.

"Somebody murdered someone?"

"Oh no, miss. It's Miss Elk—Miss Virginia, I should say. Mr. Low's sent round all the papers, his chauffeur brought them. Look, see this one, 'Leon Low's new find,' and here's another nice piece, 'One of the loveliest girls that ever sprang to fame in a night.' But there's better yet—listen to this: 'Looby 'erself was played by Virginia, a young girl of breath-catchin' beauty, whether she could dance or sing I neither knew nor cared, it was enough to be allowed to look at 'er,' " Mrs. Hodge sighed. "Fancy wakin' up to read that about yerself."

Mouse turned the papers over.

"Dear, dear! Well, you better call the breath-catching beauty and give them to her to read."

Mrs. Hodge gathered up the papers.

"You know if I was to read that about meself, it'd turn me head."

"That'd be shock. These won't upset Miss Vir-

ginia. I expect she'll think they're half-hearted." She sat up. "Did you say it was nearly half-past ten when you came in? Hop along then, I've got to send a telegram, and when you've done your paper round, you might get us some breakfast."

As the door shut she got out of bed and put on her dressing-gown, and rummaged round until she found half an envelope on which she had jotted down a telegram. 'Please be at the flat two-thirty, I must see you. Flossie.' She looked at it disapprovingly. It sounded a curt way for a daughter to wire to her mother, but she could not see how to improve it, so she picked up the telephone and dictated it. She went into the kitchen, Mrs. Hodge was just taking the coffee percolator off the stove.

"Is Miss Virginia awake?"

"Yes, dear, lookin' a picture readin' the papers."

"Serve both breakfasts in her room." She opened Flossie's door. "Good morning. How's Mother's clever girl? You certainly have made a success."

"Have I?" Flossie opened her eyes in a wide childish stare. "Do you really think so?"

Mouse sat on the bed with a bump.

"Don't waste any of that big-eyed innocence. For an intelligent girl you are taking the hell of a time to grasp that your Auntie Mouse has you taped. Never waste a performance on me."

Flossie wriggled into the sheets. "I don't know what she means," she said to herself; "of course she

would be unkind this morning. Jealous, that's what it is."

Mrs. Hodge brought in the tray. She pulled up the table conveniently close to Flossie's hand.

"Drink your coffee while it's hot, dear, and eat a roll, they're lovely and fresh, you need to keep your strength up; none of us stays young and beautiful for ever." She turned to Mouse. "That's right, isn't it, dear?"

Mouse sighed.

"Must you address me in that personal manner, bringing a note of gloom into this morning of joy? But you're right." Mrs. Hodge went regretfully out of the door. It was dull in her kitchen; it would have been nice to have stayed in here and heard about last night. Mouse nodded at the tray.

"Pour it out, there's a love." She waited until she had her cup and then added casually, "Your mother's coming here at half-past two."

Flossie put down the milk jug so suddenly that the milk splashed over the tray. She felt as if a worm was taking a stroll in her stomach.

"Why?"

"Because I've asked her to come. You can't go on like this. Do you realise the wretched woman doesn't even know she's not your mother?"

Flossie dropped her eyes and fidgeted with the corner of a paper. It was obvious that this day was coming, somebody had got to tell Mum the truth,

but she had half hoped Mouse would do it. It was neither laziness nor cowardice which had kept her from speaking out, but inability to see how to begin. It seemed to her that if Mum proved unreasonable her whole new world would topple. She looked with honest anxiety at Mouse.

"I suppose you wouldn't talk to her?"

"No, I can't break in on the big scene, but I'll be about." She looked at Flossie. "Don't make heavy weather over it. After all, this royal stuff wasn't your idea, and it's only been spread as a rumour. You can deny it at any time."

Flossie thought for a second that Mouse was pulling her leg, and then saw to her astonishment that she was serious. Was it possible that she thought that she, Virginia, would make herself a laughing-stock, and be condescended to, even by the chorus, by admitting the greengrocery in the Fordham Road? During the last weeks for moments together she had succeeded in forgetting it herself. Didn't Mouse realise that she was quite conscious it was a background to be ashamed of, and forgotten as soon as possible?

"As a matter of fact," Mouse went on, "deny it as much as you like, but you won't find it easy to kill the story. It's a thing you might bear in mind, because some day somebody may start a rumour that you won't like. Don't give people more chances to talk than you can help, because gossip's easier than

yawning to start, and it's never ended because there's always someone somewhere who believes it."

'Well, that's a comfort,' thought Flossie, but aloud she said:

"Awful how careful a girl has to be."

Mouse looked at her and felt an overpowering wish to giggle, she never had a conversation of any length with Flossie without wishing somebody, preferably Jim, was there to enjoy the joke with her. She tried to save up the best things to repeat, but without Flossie's expression, they lost in the telling. She did not want to hurt the child's feelings, so she hid her smile by getting up for some matches for her cigarette. 'I'll never be able to be angry with her, whatever she does,' she thought. 'I could forgive anything to a person who handed me so many laughs. Yet everybody didn't feel like that. How odd Jasmine had been. Fancy bothering to dislike anything so silly as Flossie. After L.L.'s party last night, waiting for the cars to take them home, the way she had whispered, "A minx, Mouse." Of course, engrossed talking to Jim, she hadn't herself been looking at the girl, but had Jasmine? Was her remark based on impression or study?'

Flossie looked at Mouse from under her eyelids. Was this a good moment to talk to her? From Friday next she'd earn a salary, and that meant that the arrangement that she was kept and fed while training was finished. Mouse hadn't said anything, but

was she meaning her to live somewhere else? Careful thought had shown her that the present living arrangements could not be bettered. Dad and Mum approved of them. If Dad and Mum were to be told that there wasn't a Flossie Elk, and since Virginia wasn't their daughter they wouldn't see her, it would be easier if they felt that she was under the guardianship of Mouse. Then there was the question of finance. Living with Mouse she had realised what a little way money goes; she knew just what dressing she needed; in her present wardrobe nothing, except the outfit L.L. had provided for the party last night, would do, as Virginia she needed clothes to live up to her story and her stardom. Her contract with L.L. started at ten pounds a week and rose five pounds each year for five years, so that when she finished it she would be earning thirty. In the meantime it was only ten and in her opinion most inadequate. Deep in her soul she knew that a girl like herself ought to be denied nothing. Enquiry had shown her that she was on to a good thing in Mouse's flat; nowhere else could she approach its comfort for the sort of sum she was prepared to pay. Then last night at the party she had found the third and greatest reason for staying where she was. Mouse knew a Lord and Lady. Speaking of the Lord she had tried to deceive her into thinking he was an ordinary man by just calling him Jim Menton, but L.L. wasn't mean like that; he

had known she was the sort of person who ought to know Lords, he was very surprised to know they had never met before, and had said at once: "This is Lord Menton," and to him, "I needn't tell you that this is Virginia." She had been so surprised to find he was a Lord that she had almost said: "Pleased to meet you," instead of the off-hand greeting Mouse had told her was correct, but she had swallowed it just in time. There had been no more chance to talk to him, which was a good thing as she didn't know what to call a Lord, but in this flat she was bound to meet him again, and she'd find out. She hadn't liked the look of the Lady, she supposed if you liked people dark and not very young, you might call her beautiful, but she wasn't her type. She seemed to be a friend of Mouse's which she wouldn't be if she knew how many times her husband came to the flat. She looked at Mouse standing in the window smoking. Except for a decided feeling of distrust she had never clearly defined her feelings about her, but now, having met the Lady, she was almost sure she disliked her; they both looked as though nothing mattered much and most things were funny when they weren't. Flossie was not even sure that Mouse didn't find her success funny. What a pity, she thought, that a girl couldn't live with men; men were so much nicer.

Mouse came back and sat down on the edge of the bed.

"What have you been thinking about so seriously?"

This was an obvious opening. Flossie looked up with her sweetest smile.

"I was thinking how happy I've been, living with you, and wondering whether you'd let me stay." Mouse's face gave her no lead as to what she was thinking, so she tried a wistful note: "I don't earn much money, of course, but I would pay whatever you thought right for this one little room."

The question of Flossie's departure had not troubled Mouse. The last months rent-free had made her clearer of debt than she had been for years, but that was not to say that further clearance would not be to the good. She had supposed that Flossie would want to stay on for a week or two, but this more or less permanent suggestion came as a surprise. She didn't want the girl, but it seemed a pity to turn good money from the door.

"Three pounds a week, the arrangement to come to an end at any time," she said briskly.

"Threel!" Flossie's face fell. "I thought two, or perhaps two-ten."

"No, my dear Mrs. Rosenbaum, three pounds vos my terms."

'Oh, she's ever so mean,' Flossie thought; 'three pounds. It isn't as though I ate much; wants me to keep her, I should think.' But aloud she said grudgingly:

"All right, three pounds."

"The ghost walking on Friday nights, it will be paid on Saturdays, so ask them to pay you in notes and not by cheque." Mouse got up and stretched. "Me for a bath." She crossed to the dressing-table and looked at her face. "God, what a hag!" She turned to go, and as she moved her dressing-gown caught on to Flossie's evening bag. It fell to the floor and opened, scattering a cloakroom tickét, handkerchief, lipstick, powder-box, and two five-pound notes at her feet. She stooped and picked the things up; she folded the notes carefully. Yesterday she had lent Flossie a pound to carry her on until Friday, for this week the ten shillings allowance paid to her while training had stopped. Where in the world then had she got hold of ten pounds? It was none of her business, but it put an entirely different complexion on this idea of the girl living in the flat.

Flossie watched Mouse upset her bag and study her notes. She knew she was wondering how she had got them. 'It's none of her business,' she thought. 'I suppose a little present needn't make everybody nosy.'

Mouse put the bag back on the dressing-table and sat on the edge of it.

"If you stay on in this flat you've got to understand that you look after yourself. As long as you behave in the flat, it's not my business what you do

outside, though if you've any sense you'll listen to my advice, because I know my world and you don't. I shall explain this to your mother this afternoon, and I'll write to your father."

Flossie said nothing for a moment. 'Oh, I do think she's mean,' she thought, 'she knows what Dad is.'

"I suppose you've turned nasty," she muttered at last, "because you saw a little money in my bag. I suppose you think you're the only one who ought to have anything."

"My dear girl, don't be so silly, I don't care if you've ten pounds or fifty, but seeing the money put it in my mind that it's time I stopped acting as Nanny."

Flossie pleaded the eiderdown.

"As a matter of fact, since you're so nosy, it was given me to buy a bouquet."

"Yes? You ought to be able to get quite a nice little bunch with it."

"It was that nice gentleman—man, I mean—who sat next to me at supper."

Mouse looked at her almost with respect.

"What, old Ossie Bone?" Flossie nodded. "Do you know who he is?" The other shook her head. "Just owns about half the newspapers in the country. That's all."

"Well, he can afford it then."

"He certainly can. I've always heard he's mean,

just shows how unfair gossip is."

Flossie felt encouraged by Mouse's manner.

"You see he said if he'd known just how pretty I was, he'd have sent me some flowers. So I said I was sorry he hadn't. So he put his hand under the table," Mouse's eyes were goggling, "and gave me the money and told me to buy myself something pretty."

"Well now, isn't that a nice story? And he never suggested another meeting?"

"Yes, he did, he asked me to motor with him to lunch at Guildford on Sunday."

Mouse looked at her. She looked as innocent as a daffodil.

"Look here, my sweet," she came to the bedside. "I've always said your Auntie Mouse had you taped, but you've beaten me this time. Do you honestly think that a nice drive into the country is all that Ossie's after?"

Flossie again pleaded the sheet. She hated putting any card on the table, but it did seem as though this time she would have to. If Mouse meant to write to Dad, then it would be better if she thought that she could take care of herself. She looked up with half a smile.

"I think it's all he'll get."

CHAPTER XIII

FANNY had awoken, feeling, as she explained to George, all anyhow. Knowing it was Flossie's first night had worked her up to such a state of excitement she had not been able to sleep. It seemed so funny somehow not knowing if she was all right. Lying awake is apt to bring thoughts, kept at bay in the day hours, to roost in the brain. Fanny had a lot of thoughts kept at bay, and by two o'clock in the morning she could no longer hold them back. Why hadn't Flossie been able to get her a seat? Not a grand one, just anywhere would have done. It was nice of Miss Shane to have written to explain how difficult it was to get seats, but at two in the morning that hadn't helped much. 'Course I know it's difficult, a first night like that's bound to draw all the nobs, but she might have managed one seat, just for her Mum.' For days her waking thoughts had fought the suggestion that Floss was acting queer, but in the early hours she had to admit it. Not a sign of her, not even a post card from the day the first rehearsal had begun. Of course she was working hard, no denying that, but she might have managed to slip down one Sunday, she must have known how her Mum would enjoy a good gossip, hearing

all about everything. Then that business of changing her name. Course she could call herself what she liked, and no one had the right to stop her, but it would have been nice if she'd sent a line to let them know she was doing it, and not left it so Mr. Smith down the High Street had to show Dad a photo in the paper. Nice photo it was, with a piece under it calling her 'Virginia,' Leon Low's new discovery to play the name part in 'Looby.' Dad had brought the paper home; he didn't seem upset her changing her name, just said, 'Floss up to her foolishness,' but it would have been nice if she'd told her Mum, they could have had a bit of fun together choosing it. Of course there was nothing in it, but it would have been nice if she'd told her Mum.

They did not take in a daily paper, George liked to read his *Express* on Sundays, but he had not much time for reading all the week, so as soon as she had the breakfast cleared away Fanny put on her hat and went to Gregson's, the stationers on the corner. It took her quite a time to get there, she was feeling so bad it would not have surprised her if her inside had dropped out on the pavement. Mrs. Gregson was serving, she looked up and smiled broadly.

"I said to Mr. Gregson when he went out to take round the papers, 'I know who'll be in while you're gone, and that's Mrs. Elk.' Made a wonderful success,

hasn't she? You were there, I suppose."

Fanny sank into a chair.

"No." She eyed the pile of papers, hardly able to prevent herself from snatching at them. "I've not been so well lately, so I asked Floss not to get me a seat till later."

"You don't look up to much, I must say. I said to Mr. Gregson after chapel last Sunday night, 'Mrs. Elk doesn't look herself, not at all she doesn't. Nasty colour she is.' You had any growths in your family, dear?"

"No." Fanny picked up a *Daily Mail*. "I'll take the *Mail*, Mr. Elk likes that one." Feverishly she turned over the pages.

"Ah!" Mrs. Gregson came round from behind the counter. "You take the *Mail*, there's a nice piece in, but you have a look at some of the others while you're here."

Fanny looked. She opened paper after paper. It was wonderful reading. Of course it wasn't easy to think of Flossie as Virginia, but there was no mistaking it was her all right, with all the pictures of her looking up in just that pretty way of hers. Mrs. Gregson read over her shoulder, breathing heavily because of the stooping this entailed, and she was no figure to stoop.

"Why'd they call her Virginia, Mrs. Elk? There's been a lot asking that."

Fanny pretended to be absorbed in her reading,

it gave her a moment to think. Why? Funny Mrs. Gregson should ask that after what she'd been thinking in the night. Why? She looked up.

"Well, Flossie hasn't said exactly, but——" Fanny lowered her voice to a confidential note, "it's my belief it was to please her dad. You see, Mr. Elk being so religious-minded, he never properly held with her goin' on the stage, and I think she thought it'd sort of please him if she called herself somethin' different."

"And 'as it?"

"I couldn't say," said Fanny with truth, "he's never been a man to speak how he feels." She got up, and laid a penny on the counter, "That's for the *Mail* and thank you ever so for lettin' me 'ave a look at the others."

"Oh, it's a pleasure. Will she be home this weekend?"

Fanny stepped into the street.

"She may, and she may not, it's all accordin'. Good morning, Mrs. Gregson."

George was in the shop. She took him the paper.

"There's a bit about Floss in there. Seems she's made a wonderful hit. I had a read of some lovely pieces about her up at Gregson's. I bought the *Daily Mail*, knowing you like that one."

George continued to sort potatoes.

"Put it there. I'll take a look later." He glanced at Fanny, and paused in his work. "Your stomach

giving you trouble? You look bad."

"Yes. I don't rightly know how I got up the street. It's cruel this morning."

He jerked his thumb at the door into the house.

"You go in and have a nice sit down, and make yourself a cup of tea."

Fanny filled the kettle mechanically, and then, waiting for the water to boil, sank in a heap in the arm-chair. She stared almost without thought through the window, over the rusty gate to the street beyond. Suddenly the years slipped away like shadows. Flossie swung on the gate. There was the little red coat she'd made her, and the little cap. Funny remembering that day, it was the time she had planned how things should be for her. Funny here she was grown up and all the things she'd hoped for coming true. Suddenly a great sob broke in her throat, and she had her head in her hands and was crying, "I never thought it would be this way, Floss. Why don't you come and see your Mum?"

Half an hour later the telegram came. She read it, then, grey-tinted with fright, she ran to George.

"Something's wrong, I know it. Shouldn't wonder if she was ill."

George studied the telegram.

"Nothing ain't wrong, why should it be? First she says half-past two, if she was ill Miss Shane would have sent and said we was to come at once. Accord-

in' to what I read in the paper she was all right last night, and she's all right this mornin' or she wouldn't have sent no telegram." He hung a bunch of bananas, which he had taken down for a customer, back on its hook. "After dinner I'll bring the arm-chair in here out of the kitchen so you can sit comfortable same time as minding the shop, and I'll go up West and see what she wants."

"Oh, I do wish I didn't feel so bad." Fanny's face was creased with anxiety. "You see, it says Mrs. Elk on the envelope, and she says: 'Must see you,' that means she wants her Mum."

"Well, she can't 'ave 'er. With your inside dropped the way it is to-day, you couldn't get to the High Street, let alone to Miss Shane's flat. Now you go and get dinner ready, and after put on the big kettle so's I can have a nice wash."

Mouse had sent Mrs. Hodge out, so that she should not see Fanny, so it was she who opened the door to George.

"Good gracious, Mr. Elk! I was expecting your wife. Come into the sitting-room. I'll call Flossie." George sat down in an arm-chair; he fidgeted round looking for somewhere to put his hat. Mouse took it from him. "Let me take that outside. You'll have a cigarette, won't you? What's happened to Mrs. Elk?"

George took a cigarette and lit it.

"Well, you know she's always suffered with 'er inside ever since Floss was born, and to-day it's something chronic." Mouse made a sympathetic sound, and then went out to put his hat in the hall and call Flossie. "Great sufferer, Mrs. Elk 'as always been," he added when she came back.

Mouse made the same sympathetic sound.

"How's the allotment? Those were lovely apples you gave me."

"It's not really an allotment, it's a bit I rent from a gentleman private, it's a garden really. It's done a treat this year, I did mean to have brought you up some of my peas, but it's not easy for me to get away middle weeks, and, of course, young Floss was home week-ends—" There was a footstep, he looked up and nodded at his daughter standing in the doorway. "Hullo, my girl, come and give your Dad a kiss."

Only by a faint flush did Flossie show the dismay she felt at sight of her father. She managed her usual sweet smile.

"Hullo, Dad. Where's Mum?"

"I just been telling Miss Shane. She's got one of 'er nasty turns. She's pleased you done so well last night."

Mouse patted Flossie's shoulder.

"Well, I'll leave you two to talk. I'll see you before you go, Mr. Elk."

George looked at Flossie. Very restless she

seemed, walking about the room and fiddling with the ornaments.

"You wanted to see your Mum. Anything wrong?" Flossie stood on one leg. It made her suddenly childish and like the little Flossie who had played on the shop floor. His voice softened. "Come and sit down and let's have it whatever it is, things go bad with keepin'."

Flossie sat on a stool, she pulled it near her father's chair and patted his knee.

"I'm so glad you could come, it was you I would have asked, but I thought you wouldn't be able to get away."

"Well, it's 'ard, as you know well, but I've managed it this once seein' your mother's queer. Now what is it?"

Flossie ran her finger backwards and forwards across his knee; she looked at the carpet.

"It's about them calling me Virginia."

George looked surprised.

"Is that all? Well, telling us to-day is a bit cryin' after the milk's spilt, isn't it? It's a bit of silliness. Elk's always been good enough for me and it's good enough for you. But you can call yourself what you like, your Mum and I won't stand in the way of that."

Flossie raised shocked eyes.

"I never wanted to change. It was Mr. Low and the others, they made me. You see, Mr. Low said

not knowing who my father was, made it exciting."

George felt his time was being wasted.

"Come on, my girl. I don't mind what you call yourself, but don't talk silly. You say Mr. Low called you Virginia because he didn't know who your father was. But you did. Couldn't you tell him?"

"Oh I did, but he said if people didn't know they might think things."

"Think what things?"

"That my father was royal."

George gave her a puzzled stare. He had come to think of Flossie as unstable, but he began now to have doubts as to her intelligence. He tapped her hand.

"That's not at all the way to talk. I don't know what the King and Queen would say if they 'eard you. Royal indeed! I knew this dancin' would lead to silliness, but I never thought it'd make you as silly as this. Elk's our name and there's plenty as knows it, and they never 'ave thought us belongin' to the Royal Family and they aren't likely to think it now."

"Not that sort of Royalty," Flossie snapped, for she felt she was making very little headway. "Foreign. I do wish you'd listen so I could explain."

"Well, explain if you can. What you've said so far is that you were called Virginia so that not havin' a name, people would think your mother and me

belonged to a foreign royal family. If you can make sense of that I'll be glad to hear it. But there's one thing I'd like to say first. Nobody'll take you for anything better than what you are, no matter what you call yourself, and you shouldn't be wishful that they should."

Flossie got up; she moved to the window.

"But suppose I do wish it. A greengrocer's shop in the Fordham Road is a pretty sordid background for a girl, don't you think? And whatever you may think, Mr. Low and Miss Lynd and everybody know that I might be anybody."

"Lot of silliness. Don't you believe them, my girl. Call yourself what you like; you were born in the Fordham Road of respectable but very ordinary people, and it's only because you're nobody that they're putting this silliness into your head. If you were a real lady born you wouldn't allow it, and they wouldn't try it on."

"It's not true." Her eyes extraordinarily blue with temper, she stood in front of him. Gone was Mouse's careful training, her voice rose to a scream. "I am different. I'm beautiful. God knows how I managed it with yours and Mum's ugly dials as a start, but I've managed it, and I mean to make something of it. I'll be who I like, and I'll climb up in the world. And I'll tell you something else, I'm not trailing you and Mum behind me so's everybody can laugh and say: 'She thinks a lot of herself but look

at her father and mother, couple of scarecrows.' Miss Lynd has spread it about that Mr. Low found me in a convent, he's let them think I might have some royal blood in me, and so I might too, and that's the story I'm sticking to. And what I wanted to say to Mum was I hoped you'd both keep your mouths shut, and not come bothering me, and I won't come bothering you. And now you've got it straight."

She stood there panting, ready to burst out again if George should argue, but he did not. He got up and looked round in a blind way for his hat. Not seeing it, he went to the door without it. He turned before he opened it, he spoke quite quietly.

"You're independent, and earning a good livin', and I shan't interfere with you, neither will your mother, and we expect nothing. There's a parable in the Scriptures about the prodigal son, you'll remember that. If anything should 'appen, no money or trouble of any kind, you've only got to come 'ome, you'll always be welcome."

Mouse was standing in the passage, she had been drawn there with the intention of quieting Flossie, who must surely have been heard in all the other flats. She looked pityingly at George as he came out. She put her hand on his arm.

"There's just two things I want to say. Flossie can go on living here, we've arranged that, but I've told her, I'm just a roof, I'm not responsible for her behaviour. But as a matter of fact, I don't think

that need worry you, she seems to me well able to take care of herself. Then I wanted to send a message to Mrs. Elk. Tell her I'll keep in touch with her, she shall have all the news from me. I shall be inviting myself to tea one day soon."

George walked to Charing Cross Station. He tried to puzzle things out. It must be a judgment. 'I don't question the Lord's ways,' he thought, 'but sometimes they're hard to understand. What am I to say to Fanny?' Outside the station he passed a fruit shop; almost unconsciously he paused to look, and his eyes were fixed on a bunch of purple grapes. He never stocked grapes himself, there was no demand for them down his way; to him they were the quintessence of luxury. He went in, and though appalled at the price, bought the bunch. As he crossed to the station, he looked at the box that held them with some comfort. A nice bit of fruit like that would be sure to be a help to Fan.

Part III

CHAPTER XIV

JASMINE was decorating the Christmas tree. Mouse knelt by a box of ornaments and passed them to her to hang. Jasmine loved a tree.

"I shall hate it," she said, "when the children are too old to have one. Of course they nearly are already; when you think of it Meriel's fifteen and Lucia's twelve."

"Avis is still a baby."

"Yes, ten's a nice Christmas-treeish age, but they grow up so quickly. I seemed to be a child for hundreds of years and they seem to be children for about five minutes."

"No one would ever think Meriel was fifteen."

"No, she's not a bit a grown-up miss, thank goodness. All the same, in no time now we shall be doing courts and dances and the paper will say: 'I saw Lady Menton, one of our sourest hostesses, yawning her head off while she waited for her débutante daughter.' And when you think I've three daughters and will be doing it for years, it's frightful."

"Don't pretend to me, my sweet." Mouse passed her a gold apple. "You've got a throbbing mother-heart, you'll adore it."

She spoke lightly, but there was an undercurrent in her tone which made Jasmine look at her. She sat back on her haunches.

"This being the season of goodwill," she stammered over the last word, "I think it might be nice to say a little something. Do you realise it's not been dog-in-the-mangerish all these years?"

Mouse handed her a blue glass swan with a green feather tail.

"Here's a handsome creature. Of course I've always understood and thought you perfectly right, homes *are* homes."

"It's not homes, it's the children." She stood up and hung the swan so that it looked as though it were swimming on fir leaves. "That's rather sweet there, isn't it? Jim's an awfully nice father, and they don't see anything wrong. Anyway, you've got everything that matters."

Mouse with great care selected a silver ball with red stripes running across it. She swung it to and fro on her finger.

"I haven't, of course. You've got everything that matters. It's such idiotic things that do matter. It's always been a puzzle to me the purely physical business holding the place it does in law, and in the minds of the average person."

"I didn't mean that entirely, it's the understanding of each other that comes from it. You'd think with three children Jim and I would have got to

it." She flushed and took the silver ball off Mouse's finger. "I hated the business, it was my fault things were a failure, and that's why I sometimes think I'm being mean."

Mouse was still sitting with one finger stretched out, she had never noticed Jasmine had removed the ornament from it.

"How silly it is, what one envies. Just the way you throw letters across the table to each other to read, and plan surprises for the children, and have long silly arguments about whether you must invite so-and-so to dinner, and sit on the edge of each other's baths discussing life. For me it's always hectic, there's very little of that sort of companionship."

Jasmine smiled.

"It may be that I've kept the glamour going for you both, keeping you apart. A lot of bath conversations are on constipation. Give me a piece of tinsel." Mouse passed it to her and she climbed up the step ladder and hung it. She looked down through a branch. "I hope I've not muddled my motives, it's so difficult to be sure."

Mouse stood up and stretched.

"I'm sure you haven't. It's just the way life goes."

Jasmine climbed down the ladder.

"Let's have a rest and a cigarette before we put on the candle clips." She looked up at the tree. "It does look nice and it's a good thing. A blood-some Christmas this will be."

Mouse lit both their cigarettes.

"Well, if you will invite the Virgin Queen. What came over you? You said you'd never have her inside the house. When she said you'd rung up to invite her, I thought it was a dream fulfilment; after all, she's been angling for an invitation ever since she's lived with me."

"It's bait she's invited as. You know about Derwent, Jim's nephew and incidentally, since I couldn't make a boy, his heir?"

"I knew there was a Derwent."

"He's a thorn in the family flesh. Very gay he is, lives like a millionaire on about seven hundred a year. His father, Jim's younger brother, was killed in the war, so everybody sort of feels responsible. It was obvious he'd get into debt in the Army, so they made him a member of the Stock Exchange so he could make lots of money. But he hated it, so his week-ends covered every day but Wednesdays, and on Wednesdays he played shove-halfpenny with the other members; he got very good at it. He never made any money; hardly could, considering. Of course as Jim's heir his credit was good, and people were willing to wait to be paid, but early this year things came to a pretty pass and he missed the bankruptcy court by a hair."

"Jim's hair?"

"Of course. He paid everything up on condition he got a job at a weekly wage."

"And did he?"

"No, but that's not his fault. You see he can't do anything except shoot and fish and play cricket, golf, and shove-halfpenny. So Jim says to me: 'What'll we do with nephew Derwent?' And I had a brain-wave. 'Let's get Ossie Bone to make him a reporter,' I said, so Jim says, 'How do we get Ossie Bone to do that?' And I said, 'Let's ask him here and we'll get Derwent to meet him.' 'Will Ossie Bone come?' says Jim; 'he doesn't like me, and he hardly knows you, so why should he?' And that's when I had my brain-wave."

"Virginia?"

Jasmine sighed and took a pull at her cigarette.

"Now you've spoilt my story, I hate people who say the end for me. But that's quite right. So I rang the girl up at the theatre—I took a risk there because if she had said 'yes' and then Ossie Bone said 'no' I was landed with the little wretch for nothing. So I wrote to him and said who was coming, just ourselves, and you and Myra Lynd, nephew Derwent, and Virginia. I almost underlined her name. It worked a treat."

Mouse flicked some ash at the tree.

"He'd hardly got your letter before he was on the telephone to the Virgin Queen asking if he could bring her down."

"Myra nearly wrecked everything by suggesting that she might cadge a lift off him, but I nipped

that in the bud; we don't want him arriving soured. Jim's bringing Myra, did he tell you?"

Mouse nodded.

"Who's bringing nephew Derwent? Awful if he didn't turn up."

"He will, he wants his car back, he's being made to live within his income, and he couldn't have his little flat and his man to look after him and a car, so the car went. He's coming by train. Do you know the ins and outs of *l'affaire Ossie*? Ought they to have adjoining rooms?"

"Mercy! The Virgin Queen? She's terribly respectable, she'd have a fit. Do you know it's over two years now he's known her, and he's never allowed inside the flat unless I'm in."

"Yet folks do say he's spent a pretty penny on her. How's she do it?"

"How does she ever do it if it comes to that? Look at the other men who've spent money on her. She's got the most incredible amount of jewellery, and all come by honest—if you call it honest. Look at the unlucky Bobby Kite: he spent every penny he earned on her and then, getting nothing, he took to drowning his sorrows, and of course his voice went off and now he's out of work. But believe me, the moment he's working once more, he'll start all over again. She won't see him at present, she believes in the simple plan of never knowing a poor man."

"Don't any of her young men ever get on to her?"

"She doesn't as a rule know them very young, for the young haven't control of their incomes. Of course, she met her match in L.L.; he spent God knows what on her for a month or two, and then he rumbled the lady, and I believe told her a few home truths, because she said to me in the wistful way she does when she's angling for sympathy, that it was awful the way managers thought they could do anything they liked, and were angry if a girl said they couldn't."

"But she must be earning quite a lot, she doesn't need the support of all these men."

"Twenty pounds a week; she started the third year of her contract in September. She pays me three pounds a week, but as far as I know that's all she spends."

"She dresses marvellously, that must cost a bit."

"Don't you believe it, she has a deep conviction that beauty like hers ought to be supported on public funds, and she sees to it that they are. I don't suppose she ever pays her own dressmaker's bills."

"Whatever makes you put up with her? Why don't you turn her out, and make her get a place of her own?"

"Poverty. The three pounds is useful. Besides, she makes me laugh. Nobody has ever handed me the laughs that girl has."

"But she's such a little beast, I'd hate people to think she was my friend."

"The people who know me know what I think about her, and the people who don't know me don't matter. As a matter of fact, with a little imagination I can guess what they say, and of course that's not pleasant, but three pounds is three pounds. You know, Jasmine, I admire her in a sort of way, she's the stuff of which greatness is made."

"My God!"

"It's true, all the really great have singleness of purpose, and that's what she's got."

"What's her purpose?"

"To see that Flossie Elk, now called Virginia, is treated as befits her perfection. If you or I were half as sure of anything as she is, that her beauty and brilliance give her divine right to the best of everything, we'd be much happier. And believe me, she doesn't pretend, that's how she really feels, and she's quite incapable of believing that other people don't feel the same way about her."

Jasmine stubbed out her cigarette and picked up a handful of candle clips and began to fix them to the lower branches of the tree.

"If you'd been like her you'd have taken Jim, you could have. He'd do anything if you insisted."

"If I were her I wouldn't be in my position. She could never love anyone but herself. But if I were her and wanted somebody, of course I'd take him."

"I wonder why you haven't."

Mouse put out her cigarette and picked up a box of candles, she poked them into the clips Jasmine had fixed, throwing her an amused smile.

"It's odd, but I suppose the truth is I'm too fond of you."

Jasmine nodded.

"Comic, we should be fond of each other."

Derwent lay on his back in bed, his eyes shut, waiting for the recently swallowed Horse's Neck to kill or cure. Saunders, his man, went about the room quietly packing, but pausing now and again to glance in an experienced way at his master's colour. The effect of the Horse's Neck was good, he noted; that nasty greenish tint was wearing off, which was a comfort; with all there was to do, he had no time to be a ministering angel.

At last Derwent opened one eye.

"Don't forget to pack some presents for the kids."

"I haven't, sir. I bought them yesterday, three boxes of chocolates, nut centres for Miss Meriel, and cream for Miss—" he stopped, hearing a groan from the bed.

"For God's sake don't describe 'em."

"I didn't get nothing for his Lordship or her Ladyship, sir, not havin' no orders. And nothin' for the other guests."

"Uncle and Aunt wouldn't appreciate a present,

it hurts them to see me spend money. I don't care a damn about the other guests. Did you think I was going to take something pretty for Mr. Ossie Bone?"

"No, sir, but I thought perhaps a little something for the ladies."

"Miss Shane won't want anything. Are there any other ladies?"

"Well, I was speaking to Mr. Sims on the telephone last night to say what time to send the car to meet you, and he says Miss Myra Lynd is expected, and Virginia the actress."

Derwent sat up.

"Saunders, you're pulling my leg, and that's a dirty trick in my poor state of health."

"No, I'm not, sir. Sims said they were most excited about it in 'The Hall,' most eager to see 'er they are. I hear she's a great beauty."

"I'll say she is. What can Uncle and Aunt be doing with Virginia?"

"I couldn't say, I'm sure, sir."

Derwent lay down again, and closed his eyes, not because of nausea this time, but in meditation. There was a long silence. Then he asked:

"Nearly through, Saunders?"

"Just on, sir."

"Then throw me my notecase." He took it and pulled out a five-pound note.

"Almost my last, Saunders, but take it and go round to the Princess's Theatre and bribe the door-

keeper to go up to Virginia's dressing-room and find out what scent she uses, there's sure to be some of it about. Then go and buy the best bottle you can get."

"You'll miss the two-thirty."

"To hell with it, ring up Sims and tell him I'll come on the later one. I don't go till I've got that scent."

Myra, her fur coat over a crimson frock, and emerald green hat pulled rakishly over one eye, a gold scarf round her neck, and ear-rings jangling against her shoulders, sat beside Jim, singing carols as they tore down the Great West Road.

"'God rest you merry Gentlemen,'—oh, I do think there's something very gay about going away for Christmas—'Let nothing you dismay.' " She stopped suddenly. "I wonder you aren't dismayed at the thought of Derwent meeting Virginia."

"What harm can she do him? I hear she is exceptionally *intacta*."

"But his money won't be."

"He hasn't a bean."

"Oh. 'Hark the Herald angels sing——' she'll cut him dead then—'Peace on earth and mercy mild——' Jim," she looked up at him slyly, "as we're quite alone, and I'm renowned for my discretion; in spite of Mouse, don't you get a kick at being under the same roof as that girl?"

He thought a moment and then laughed.

"Seeing it's Christmas, yes. I wouldn't be human if I didn't."

Flossie, a sable coat over perfectly cut tweeds, and a little brown hat set sideways on her almost white curls, lay in the back of Ossie's Rolls-Royce. She was very comfortable and she should have been, both Ossie and the chauffeur having worked quite a while before they placed the cushions, rugs, and foot-warmer to her satisfaction. She had shut Ossie up when he tried to talk, saying she was tired after the show; the truth was she wanted to think. To-day was a triumph. She had intended to stay with the Mentons ever since she had known who Mouse's friends were. She supposed the reason she had not been asked before was Mouse's jealousy, she would be afraid of comparisons. But the Mentons wouldn't stand for that for ever, they'd be keen to have her to stay, of course, so here she was at last. Mouse had seemed very surprised she was going, she hadn't shown what she was feeling, but of course she was annoyed, and a bit worried. She had never wanted her to meet Lady Menton; seeing all she knew, she was scared she might talk. She had in the back of her mind that perhaps she would give just a little hint, it was all wrong the way people like Mouse got off scot-free, being as immoral as they liked; disgusting, that's what it was. Nice face Lord

Menton had, she wouldn't mind having supper with him one night. Must be rich, didn't seem to spend much on Mouse, still you could hardly expect it at her age, probably he'd given her quite a lot once. It was nice to be going to spend Christmas with a Lord, she was glad she'd let Mrs. Jones know, so that all the theatre would hear about it. Not but what Mrs. Jones was in such a nasty mood that she might keep it to herself just out of spite. A handkerchief and half a crown was a very decent Christmas present. Of course others gave pounds, but then some were silly enough to tip their dressers ten shillings every week; she wasn't starting anything like that, might as well give away all your salary and be done with it. If some people knew what she'd got invested they'd be surprised. What with one man and another, funny if she couldn't get her money well invested. She was glad Myra was coming, she thought the papers were not noticing her as much as they had, she'd get her to spread it round she'd spent Christmas with the Mentons, it would do the other Lords she knew good to hear about it. Of course they weren't people like Jim Menton, only silly boys in the Guards with only one idea in their heads, and that not at all nice. They never asked you to their homes, they were even scared if they met their mothers when they were out with you, it was as if they were ashamed of knowing you. Ashamed! That was funny. If all she'd heard of the

goings-on of these society girls was true, it ought to please the mothers that their sons knew a nice girl like her. Nobody could say she didn't know how to behave. Of course, now and then she'd let somebody take a little liberty, but you couldn't always help that with some of them so difficult. She was glad Ossie was coming too, though he wasn't quite the sort you'd expect to meet in a house like that, though of course he went everywhere, being so rich. What was he going to give her for Christmas? A cheque would be best, but she wouldn't mind a nice bit of jewellery. He knew she wanted an emerald ring, maybe he'd got her that. She'd snapped at him rather when he'd tried to talk. Poor Ossie, mustn't hurt his feelings. She snuggled against him and looked up at him with a baby expression.

"Little Virginia's tired, wants big st'ong man to west against."

Ossie had not resented being silenced. 'Poor little soul,' he thought, 'she's tired.' He looked contentedly at her, and the comforts of his car, and his chauffeur's smartly uniformed back, and his own good clothes, and gave an inward chuckle. It would be a joke if some of the boys he'd been to school with could see him now, driving with the loveliest girl in London to spend Christmas with Lord and Lady Menton.

He had started life over a fried fish shop in a back street in Liverpool. His father had been a

drunkard and a wife-beater, and his mother a scared, broken-spirited drudge. Somehow in spite of these things Ossie, alone of all his family, had climbed out of the slime of his beginnings. At the age of twelve he had persuaded the owner of a freighter, London-bound, to carry him in exchange for his services. Sea-sick almost to unconsciousness he had stuck to his bargain and worked his way. The owner had been pleased at his pluck and before parting with him gave him half a crown. That half-crown represented the boy's sole capital. Sleeping out he managed to exist on it for eight days until he got himself a job in Fleet Street as a printer's devil. He never forgot the half-crown, and the result of it was a secret that got him a name for meanness. From the first year that he had touched success, he had given a tenth of all he earned to seamen's charities. He did it anonymously, no one ever knew. His rise in the world had been comparatively slow, and his methods mainly doubtful, but the end was that he controlled one of the largest syndicates of newspapers in the country. His papers were made up of glaring headlines, mainly perversions of the truth, sheets for the women about Beauty Queens and what society wore at its last party, and one or two saccharine articles full of heart-throb, airing some supposed injustice. Ossie realised that many of his countrymen considered him a purveyor of filth, but why should he care

when a far larger proportion counted him a god, and what he caused to be printed, pronouncements from Olympus? He was devoted to his newspapers and was at his happiest in his office where he was a big man and nobody ever forgot it. In the outer world he felt smaller. It was the fault of his beginnings, he could never get over them. Though he said the right things, and wore the right clothes, and was in the right places at the right times doing the right things, he never felt that people were being open with him, he suspected them of nudges behind his back: 'Look at Ossie Bone, he thinks himself the hell of a fine fellow, but he can't get away with it.' He covered this uncertainty of soul with a dominating manner. He was a success with women, they liked being dominated, and he had the power to give any of them who could use publicity, a place in the sun. His inferiority complex had little chance to grow with them, he hardly ever made a serious overture unless he was more or less sure of success; he was a fortunate lover. Flossie was one of his few failures. He had met her after the first night of 'Looby' and convinced that she was a purchasable fruit, he had allowed himself to fall for her. The following Sunday he had made his usual overtures, he was a mite disheartened at his lack of success, but there was nothing in her excuses to make him think her refusal more than temporary. In spite of extreme generosity, and endless

publicity, he had failed ever since, and had long ago given up hope of anything beyond the merest skirmishes on the outskirts of love. He took his defeat philosophically. The truth was, on two counts he found her sufficiently a pleasure to forgive her for the one withheld. Firstly he adored being seen about with her. It might be that she would eat with anyone who could fill her bag with notes, but it was certain that every young man in the restaurant envied him. So many men were struggling to meet her, and so many more had known her for just a short time and then, unable to keep up with her expectations, had faded away, that to be known as her one steady gave him a *cachet*. Besides, those who knew nothing supposed her to share with him more than his board. Very flattering he found that. His other pleasure was in her origin. It had taken him no time to realise that here was no princess masquerading as an actress, here was a girl from his own world of pease puddings, and fried fish in scraps of newspaper, and runs on Saturdays to the pawnbrokers and back with the things on Mondays. Never once did he tell her he knew her secret, but it made conversation between them very easy, he hated a woman he had to talk grand with, he liked them to understand a nudge, a squeeze and a wink. Flossie understood all those. Insensibly she relaxed when with Ossie, she knew they got on well together, but she never knew

it was because they were both able to give up pretending. But not only because she was easy to be with did Ossie like her origin, she gave him confidence for his own life. Often he would look at her, sailing serenely through London, dining in restaurants full of nobs, carrying off the boloney about her royal parents, and never a sign she was scared. If a chit like that could get away with it so could he, Ossie Bone; they weren't laughing at her, that he could see, maybe they weren't laughing at him.

He liked to hear her talk baby stuff, and liked to feel her snuggle against him. He fumbled for her knee under the rug. She pushed his hand away.

"Naughty Ossie, dat's not yours, dat's 'ittle Virginia's."

"Oh come on, I only wanted a warm."

She gave him a nudge with her elbow.

"I know what you mean."

He put his arm round her waist.

"Who wants a Christmas present?"

She put her finger in her mouth.

"Is it a nice pwesent?"

"Wait till you open your stocking."

She rubbed her face against his sleeve.

"Dear, kind, lubly Ossie."

CHAPTER XV

MERIEL through the mists of sleep heard Mary call her, then suddenly she remembered what day it was. She sat up.

"A happy Christmas, Mary."

"A happy Christmas, Miss Meriel. Miss Burns said to remind you to get up right away."

"I will." The door shut on Mary. No harm in lying down again for just two more minutes. She snuggled into the sheets. Christmas Day. Oh, lovely! It had been more fun before she had been confirmed, so gay to wake up to that bulging stocking, to feel it slowly from the toe to the sprig of holly at the top, guessing all the way up what each bulge was, feeling the bulges in the other stockings too, and then opening them to see who was right. It did seem a shame she couldn't have a stocking now because she went to church. Mummy said it would be sure to make her late. Of course it wouldn't. She would just look at it before she went, and open it when she got back. Christmas after next Lucia would be coming to church too, and then it wouldn't be so bad. It did seem mean that just because she'd been confirmed she had to get up early and the others lie in bed opening their stockings.

There was a knock on the door, followed, before Meriel had time to protest, by Miss Burns.

"Merry Christmas, dear." She came to the bed and kissed her. "Do get up or you'll be late for church."

Meriel said she would, and intended to keep her word, but she loitered a moment to see how high she could count while she could still hear the shuffle of Burnsie's bedroom slippers going along the passage to the bathroom. She reached eight and a half and then the bathroom door shut. Must be awful to be Burnsie, she was glad she wouldn't have to be a governess. It must be nice to be an actress like Virginia. It would be nice to do anything Virginia did. If she came to morning service she wondered whether she would let her sit next to her. She wished she had a Christmas present to give her, it was a pity she came so late that all the shopping was done. She had meant to stay awake until she came and then she had gone to sleep, but she had heard the voices on the stairs and had come out. Mummy and Mouse showing Virginia her room. Everybody had said she was beautiful, but she had not expected her to be as lovely as that. Just like somebody in a fairy story. It was exciting to think she was in the house. She did wish she had a present to give her. She wished she had another rose-tree like the one she had for Mummie, that would make a lovely present for her. What a pity she had posted Aunt Dora's blotting pad, it would have made a nice

present, all the paper different colours; even a person looking like Virginia must use blotting paper sometimes, though of course she wouldn't have inky fingers or anything like that. Suddenly she heard the bathroom door open. She leapt out of bed. Goodness, that would be Burnsie finished her bath, that would mean she was almost ready, she always came very dressed out of the bathroom. Miss Burns stopped outside the door. "Nearly ready, Meriel? The car will be round in about seven minutes." Thank goodness she hadn't come in, even on Christmas day she'd have been cross. As she dashed into her clothes she wondered which was the best for church when you were late, to wash a lot and hardly any teeth, or teeth done and no washing. She dragged on her clothes and pulled a comb through her hair, but for all her rush she had only just time to snatch up her hat, coat and gloves when the car hooted under her window. She jumped down the stairs three steps at a time. 'Oh well, I'll do the washing and teeth when I get back, I can't really be dirty having had a bath last night.'

Derwent slept badly. He had thought himself in love twice in his life, the first time with a chorus girl and that had lasted eight months, and the second time with another chorus girl and that had lasted five months. Since these affairs and in between them were many ladies all of the type he admired, blonde, giggling, and very stupid. When

Virginia had appeared last night he realised he had never been in love before. He had been excited at the thought of meeting her as who, having seen her on the stage, would not be, but only the excitement of meeting the much sought after beauty of the moment. Then she arrived. She wore a sable coat but she had taken off her hat and her hair seemed like the stuff made by the silkworms he used to keep. It was a quite ordinary meeting. 'Virginia, this is my nephew.' But it had sent all his world toppling. It seemed to him that in that second everything spun round and when it came to a standstill, nothing was the same. He, a most experienced young man in drawing-rooms, had in that second become a lout; he felt all hands, he was afraid to help Virginia off with her coat, she seemed so fragile he might bruise her. She had gone up to bed almost at once, and seeing there was no purpose in remaining if she were not there, he had gone to his bed, but to sleep only in spasms. He did not dislike his night, to wake with a start to see Virginia's lovely face, to stare into the darkness marvelling that she could be under the same roof, staring until the walls almost dissolved so that he could see her as she must look asleep. The Christmas greeting of the parlourmaid who called him brought to mind the scent. How miserable a present it seemed, scent! The sort of thing any man might give her, on a par with cigarettes, chocolates, or gloves. That wretched

fellow Ossie Bone with his damned proprietary air as if because he'd motored the girl down, he'd bought her, he'd probably got her something really nice. Jewellery perhaps. No, not jewellery, a girl like that would probably refuse jewellery from a fellow like Bone and quite right too. Still, whatever he was giving her it was sure to be better than scent. He heard the car drive up and the early churchers go off; better get up, perhaps Virginia would come down for breakfast. He dismissed the thought; it was obvious a girl like that had never come down to breakfast in her life. Such a comfort to see a delicate fragile girl for once who looked as if she might have been grown in a greenhouse, he was tired of all these women at their everlasting games with faces like shoe leather. Lying in his bath he thought of all he might have done to make his scent more personal if it had not been Christmas Day and he in the depths of the country. He would have fixed a spray of orchids to it—no, not orchids, lilies, simple flowers would be best for her, orchids were for the sophisticated and artificial.

Dressed, he came out into the passage and ran into Meriel back from church carrying her presents for the family to put by their places at the breakfast table. A pile of boxes and parcels was under her right arm, her left encircled a rose-tree. Four red roses were flowering on it. His heart gave a leap. A fresh rose on Christmas morning, he would tie it to

the top of the scent.

"Meriel, my sweet lamb, give your Cousin Derwent a rose."

"Of course not." She moved the tree out of his reach, because he almost looked as if he might snatch. "It's for Mummie, and it cost seven-and-six, and even then only four roses are out."

"Darling, give me a rose and I'll buy you anything you like as soon as the shops open."

"Don't be so silly, you know you've got no money and have got to try and get some work. And anyway, I want all my roses for Mummie."

She moved off. He shrugged his shoulders, obviously she would not relent.

"If you'll wait one second I'll get some boxes of chocolates I've got for you three."

Meriel stopped dead. She turned round to him.

"Oh, Derwent, a box each?"

"Yes."

She glanced round to be sure their conversation was private.

"Could I have mine now, so nobody knows but us you've given it me, and would you mind terribly if I gave it away?"

"Whom to?"

"Somebody I forgot to buy a present for."

He saw she wanted the chocolates badly, he looked cunning.

"If I say 'yes,' give me a rose."

"Oh, Derwent, there are only four." She saw he meant to have the rose. "Well, only the little one at the top, then. Go and get the chocolates. I won't pick it till I see if they're worth it."

Flossie, in a pink satin nightdress and little coral-coloured coat, opened the small parcel which the maid had just brought in on her breakfast tray. Inside was a jewel box and in that an emerald ring. She slipped it on and the stone was so magnificent she squeaked with pleasure. Mouse knocked and came in.

"Happy Christmas." She looked at the ring. "Hullo, been pulling crackers?" She held Flossie's finger. "Well, I will say Ossie treats you proud."

Flossie snatched away her hand, disliking her tone. She looked Mouse up and down.

"Been down to breakfast, have you? That's unusual. Still, I suppose some people are worth getting up for."

"I doubt if you'll ever find them so." There was a knock on the door, Mouse opened it and the maid gave her Derwent's present done up in a box. There was a card in an envelope on top of it.

"A happy Christmas," Flossie read. "Derwent. That's the nephew, isn't it, I saw last night?"

"Yes, Jim's heir." Flossie looked up interested. "Not your cup of tea, my duck, no money, got to get a job at a few pounds a week."

"Oh." Very bored, Flossie opened the box. "My

God! It's another bottle of that filthy scent, the stuff I'm finishing up at the theatre. Can you imagine why men must choose scent? What's the matter with an order on a shop? So silly buying stuff nobody can use."

Mouse was twiddling the rose between her thumb and first finger; in a glance she had recognised that it came off the tree Meriel had given Jasmine that morning. How had Derwent come by it?

"The rose is nice anyway." She laid it on the ciderdown.

Flossie gave it a flick.

"What's the good of one rose?"

There was a knock on the door and Meriel's silvery, eager voice called out could she come in.

Flossie shrugged her little coat further on to her shoulders.

"Who the hell?" she whispered.

"Meriel, the flapper you saw in her pyjamas last night."

"I suppose nobody thinks I'd like a little sleep. Come in," she called sweetly, putting on the smile she reserved for her gallery girls and autograph collectors.

Meriel stood just inside the door, she gripped the handle with one hand and stood on her left leg, the other curled round it, her eyes were round with pleased childish amazement. To her, Flossie was a picture-book come true, a coloured print she had of

the Princess who could not sleep on a pea, she looked just as Flossie looked, even to the little coat, only the Princess in the picture had a white one. She held out the box of chocolates.

"A happy Christmas." Like her mother she had a habit of stammering at moments of stress or deep thought. "I hope you like chocolates."

Flossie, accepting Meriel as a vague attachment to her female adorers, acted almost unconsciously. She held out a hand, and at the same time looked round for some souvenir for the child to keep in memory of this wonderful day.

"Come and kiss me. How sweet of you, I adore chocolates." She snatched up the rose. "There's a tiny present from me in exchange."

Meriel took the rose.

"But Der—" she stopped, feeling that the person in the bed, lovely though she was, would think her silly if she gave it back because of hurting Derwent's feelings. "Thank you." She hurried out of the room.

Flossie looked after her with the kind smile of one who knows she has given pleasure. Mouse caught the look.

"Don't think, darling, that you've made the poor little thing's day, because the pretty business with the rose went very badly. She knew Derwent had given it to you."

Flossie opened the chocolates.

"I expect she's pleased. Girls like something like that, she'll press it." She bit a chocolate. "Oh God! A nut, they're all nuts, I hate nuts, you take them, Mouse."

In the passage Meriel shrank against the door and put the rose carefully inside the elastic in the leg of her knickers. It would be an awful thing if Derwent saw it had been given away. She went to her room and filled her tooth-glass with water and put the rose in it, and then hid it behind the clock. She stared at it miserably, feeling as though somebody had hit her, and she could not think why. It wasn't very nice of Virginia to give away Derwent's rose without asking him if she might. Suddenly to her surprise the rose grew hazy because her eyes were full of tears.

The three children and Miss Burns, and Jim, Jasmine, Mouse and Myra, went to morning service.

"Jim and I have to go," Jasmine had said, "and it will do all of you good to see what a church looks like inside, and Myra will like singing carols."

Jim did his best to persuade Derwent to come, pointing out that the village would know he was staying at the house, and would expect it. Derwent refused sulkily. He said that the village could go on expecting, that it was all a lot of rot going to church as a show. The real truth was that Virginia must get up sometime, and he wasn't going to have only that boulder Ossie about the place.

Jim was not deceived.

"The young fool will upset everything," he growled to Mouse, "drooping after that girl. If she shows one sign of liking him he can call off any chance of a job from old Bone."

Mouse patted his knee.

"You drive carefully and don't let your temper get the better of you, or we'll all be killed and then the new Lord Derwent won't need a job. Don't worry about the Virgin Queen, she asked me about Derwent this morning, and on hearing the bald truth her face was enough. I'm sorry for him. From the look of him, he's in for a sticky time."

"Won't hurt him, he needs a few knocks."

"He'll get 'em chasing that lady."

Ossie stretched himself out comfortably in an arm-chair by the library fire and read a thriller. It was a perfect book, he thought, the sort he liked best with no half-hearted villain, but an honest-to-God murderer whom no author would dare let escape, but who was bound to hang. There was one blemish in an otherwise perfect morning, and that was that damned fellow Derwent. What was the matter with him, sitting in a chair one minute, and then on the fender, and then running out into the hall leaving the door open which made a draught, and then back on the fender again glaring at him? Why the hell couldn't he get something to do? Place was full of books, surely he could pick one to keep him

quiet. At last he could bear it no longer.

"There's the Christmas number of *Punch* here, have you seen it?"

Derwent glared.

"Yes. Why?"

"Seemed to have nothin' to do."

"Thank you, I've plenty to do. It's Christmas Day, I suppose I can do nothing if I like."

Ossie lifted an eyebrow.

'Rude cub,' he thought, 'must have got a liver.' He went back to his book, the police had just unleashed the bloodhounds, it was no moment to worry about restless young men.

Derwent did not know what to do with himself. His ear was strained for a door shutting or a step on the stairs, none of the maids were about, he could get no information as to what Virginia was doing. If only he could catch her as she came down, perhaps she would come for a walk or they could sit in the drawing-room, there was a nice fire there, he had been in twice to make sure. Of course he could wait in the hall, then he would be sure to catch her, but that might make the wretched Ossie suspicious. How contented the fellow looked with his eyes glued to his book. Why couldn't he go to church or for a walk? A man of his build needed exercise. Asking him if he wanted something to do, that was funny, he might have said something rude, only of course there was this job business. He thought he heard

a sound outside; he jumped up and went into the hall. Mary the housemaid was sweeping the passage at the top of the stairs, he could see her two feet, and pink print behind with its white apron bow. He ran up to his bedroom pretending he wanted something, and then stopped casually on the way back.

"I say, do you happen to know if Miss Virginia's up yet?"

Mary was sweeping the passage just in order to see Miss Virginia dressed. Coming so late last night, only Mr. Sims had been up and they were wild to hear about her in 'the Hall.' She had already given a rapturous description of what she looked like in bed, and of every one of the garments she had unpacked this morning, but she meant to see what she looked like dressed. Mr. Derwent enquiring and hanging about was a bit of news, she wouldn't be surprised if he was struck on her, and small wonder.

"She's had her bath, sir. Shouldn't be long now."

Wouldn't be long. The news made Derwent shaky at the knees. He peeped into the library, the fellow looked more engrossed than ever, never raising his head, so he slipped out closing the door softly. In the hall he picked up *The Field* and sat on the edge of the table pretending to read. He looked anxiously at the clock. If she didn't come down soon, all the others would be back from church. Just after twelve had struck a door opened

upstairs, and simultaneously Ossie came out of the library.

"There you are, young feller-me-lad. What a book! *Murder in the Maisonette*; you read it? No? You know he cuts a woman to pieces and boils—" he looked up at the sound of Flossie coming down the stairs. She came slowly, she wore a Madonna blue frock of some heavy woollen material that clung to the figure.

'Oh my!' thought Mary, her breath taken away, she scurried off to describe the frock to the kitchen.

Derwent's knees grew weak. She was more exquisite even than he had thought her last night. She wasn't a girl, she was a poem.

"Hullo, Jinny," said Ossie casually. "Happy Christmas."

She leant over the banisters to him.

"Kind, kind Ossie. Jinny's wery, wery pleased with her lubly ring."

"Well then, how about a kiss?"

She had seen Derwent out of the corner of her eye. She disliked kissing people in front of other people as it gave the third party the idea that she was easy to kiss. Still it was a nice ring, perhaps Ossie had earned it.

"Well, just cos it's Cwistmas." She leant down to him; Derwent squirmed. She came to the bottom of the stairs. "Come on, Ossie, I'se cold, want to sit by g'eat big fire." She nodded to Der-

went coolly: "Thanks awfully for the scent." She put her hand on Ossie's arm and went with him into the library. They shut the door.

Derwent sat where he was, unconsciously clutching *The Field*. His disappointment at the end of his morning's wait was dissipated in a mood of knight-errantry. Poor lovely little thing, how had she got into the clutches of that bounder? She needed a man to look after her, that was it; she was just the type that bounders of the Ossie variety would get hold of. She was innocent enough, she just didn't know what they were after. It was then that a thought crystallised in his brain. Somehow, some day, he'd marry Virginia.

Christmas night and all the party were exhausted. There had been the tree and the dinner with many crackers, and the endless silly games, including charades in which Ossie in a skin rug had been a riot as the wolf to Avis's Red Riding-Hood. At last Miss Burns had shepherded the children to bed and the party fell limply on to sofas and chairs, except for Myra who sat at the piano playing an occasional chord or a little melody as an under-current to the talk of Mouse and Jasmine. Ossie lay back against the cushions of his arm-chair. It had been a grand day, he thought, just the right way to spend a Christmas; he had enjoyed the charades, didn't know he had it in him. He glanced sleepily across at Virginia who was curled up at the end of

the sofa facing him. She was looking up so prettily at Menton, asking questions about the house and family history. Clever girl, he glowed for her, always knew just the right sort of things to say. That young Derwent had got it badly. Leaning up against the edge of the mantelpiece so that he could look down on her. So that was why he was so restless this morning. Funny a young fellow who needed a job falling for her. Oh well, he'd learn.

Jasmine looked across at the party by the fire.

"Look at Circe, I wonder what she'll turn them into."

Mouse's eyes followed hers, and she felt an unexpected stab of jealousy. The way Flossie collected the men. Ossie was, of course, a foregone conclusion, and Derwent a pathetic case, but need she make a fool of Jim? She laughed to hide her feelings.

"Little Virgin's having a lubly, lubly time."

Myra struck a savage chord.

"We've had enough baby talk for one day, Mouse, without you starting it. I'm proud of Virginia, and God knows I should be, seeing I'm almost her creator, but one more word of baby talk and I'll do her a mischief, so I'd better go to bed." She got up. "God rest you Merry Gentlemen, I'm off to my downy couch."

The men got to their feet. So did Virginia.

"'ittle Virginia's tired too." Jasmine only just

held back a giggle. Flossie made a round, kissing and shaking hands. Jim ran to the door to open it for her, she nodded her thanks in an off-hand way. Then letting Myra precede her, she turned in the doorway and blew the party a good-night kiss.

Derwent felt suicidal; infatuated though he was, he could not fail to notice that he had less attention paid to him than any other member of the party, almost he was snubbed. He poured himself out a strong whisky-and-soda and lit a cigarette with a shaking hand. The others in the room looked at him sympathetically.

"Well, young fellow," Ossie went over to him and slapped him on the shoulder, "I hear you want a job. Come and see me three o'clock day after to-morrow, and I'll fix you up."

For one moment Derwent had a desperate wish to put his fist into that cheerful face, then he remembered that a job was the first stepping-stone to his marriage. He must get it, and make good at it.

"Thank you," he said grumpily.

Jim looked at Jasmine, they had both felt it had been a near thing.

If Ossie had noticed the pause before Derwent's rather graceless thanks, he did not show it.

"Well, good night," he shook hands all round, "I'm for bed if you'll excuse me, these charades take it out of you."

Derwent knocked back his drink and stubbed out

his cigarette, nodded at his aunt, and without a word followed Ossie up the stairs.

Jasmine looked after him.

"Dear nephew Derwent is in a bad way."

Jim got himself a drink.

"Oh well, poor fellow, the lady hasn't been too kind. I hope he holds this job down."

Jasmine yawned.

"He will, he'll need his car back to take her out. Good night, my sweets, put out the lights."

Left alone, Jim put both arms round Mouse.

"Well, lovely, what about bed?"

She leant against him.

"Have you fallen for her a bit?"

He looked down at her in amazement.

"For Virginia? My dear, no man could sit in a room with her and not be mildly intrigued. But my heart's where it's been this last ten years."

"Is it? Do you think it'll stay there another ten years?"

He tightened his arms.

"For ever and ever. Amen."

CHAPTER XVI

L.L. SMOKED a cigar and gazed at the roof, there was a new and permanent anxious pucker between his brows. Ferdie had his eyes shut; anyone not knowing his method of concentrating might have supposed him sleeping. He wore a dull green pull-over the colour of which seemed to reflect in his cheeks. Ambrose Hay was talking. He sat at the piano, he was unaware that the eyes of neither of the others were on him because his own were glued to the opposite wall on which his visual imagination was painting those things his tongue and fingers were telling. He was a tall, scraggy young man, with long fidgety fingers; it was no wonder he was emaciated, for his nerves and brain ate up any fueling his body received. He had thought success would be fun and an end in itself. He got it immediately he put a pen to paper and found it was neither; it seemed to mean very little time to himself and the certainty of being talked to by hundreds of people he would rather avoid. He was kept going by the rather pathetic belief that under the layers of his facility was a stratum of genius. He had every chance to probe for it, for no scrap of music or writing fell from his fingers but somebody

snapped it up. In the silence of the night a nagging voice whispered to him that such wholehearted support of all he did was unlikely to produce any one worth-while thing.

"—and the mermaid, a mere silhouette she is, against the evening sky, slips back into the sea. There's a fade-out there and the lights go up again on the cove and the sea, and there's the young man singing the love refrain." He played it softly. "Then there should be a slow fade-out, and then one of your big effects, L.L., the sea"—Ferdie groaned, "waves and spray, and suddenly the little pale head of the mermaid rising, and then her arms stretched out to answer the love refrain, and then slowly she's drawn back into the sea. The last notes of the love-song come across the water. Black-out."

L.L. nodded.

"That's fine, Ambrose. It's a grand melody. But what you said about the little pale head. Were you thinking Virginia'd play this?"

Ambrose looked surprised.

"Of course."

"But her contract's up. She's finishing the run of 'Golden Girl' because there was a clause in her contract about the run of the show she was in. But her five years expired in September."

"And we're not in mourning," Ferdie put in.

"But I must have her." In Ambrose's voice was all the hurt wonder of the spoilt child thwarted

for the first time. "The actual stuff's muck, of course, but the music's all right, and it's written for her. When I write for a person it's for them and nobody else." There was a very slight threat in his last remark.

L.L. glanced at Ferdie who was sitting up taking notice. He crossed to the piano and leant on it over to Ambrose.

"The trouble is your ballet, I must have a leading lady who can dance it and who'll pass muster with George Gene."

"My ballet!" Ambrose's tired eyes surveyed the other with amusement. "That ballet isn't written for a hop-skip-and-jump Miss out of a musical comedy; it's written for a dancer. Dancing's an art."

"My dear man," L.L. tapped the top of the piano with his forefinger, "it's all very well to talk like that, but do you realise what's happening around you? There's the most almighty slump on the way, it's already started, things are worse in the theatre than I've ever known them, and they're not going to improve, not for a long time anyway. We've got it partly because they're making talking pictures, but mostly because of the state of the world. In spite of all this and the most appalling returns for 'Golden Girl' I'm going all out on your revue, but I daren't overweight the salary list because that'll mean we can't afford a bad night."

Ambrose nodded.

"I know all that and I've been watching it coming, which most of you haven't. But the dancer needn't upset everything, they're cheap enough."

"I know." L.L. looked at Ambrose as though he would like to shake him. "But George wants an enormous corps to support the principals."

"Well, you always do have an enormous chorus; choose properly trained dancers this time." He grinned at L.L. "But I must have Virginia." He struck a few chords on the piano. "I don't like the girl from hearsay. She sounds an unpleasant bit of work."

Ferdie nodded.

"You've said it."

"But she has something which no other actress possesses in anything like the same degree: Glamour. She looks as though she bathed in champagne and slept on rose-leaves, and all the things that no one ever did. She's what every man in the stalls has paid to see when he takes a seat for any musical show, and she's the Pit and Gallery's dream come true. I was passing the stage door one evening when she arrived for the show. She was in an enormous car——"

"It's a nice car, Ossie Bone's," Ferdie murmured.

"Yes, Ossie Bone's, he was with her. The chauffeur, helped by Ossie, took the rug off her as though she were a bed of lilies, and she stepped out. A crowd was waiting to see her go in and they, and

the other drab folk in the street, looked beside her like beings from another planet. A white-faced young man in evening dress was waiting to see her, he stepped forward and humbly asked her something which she imperiously, with a shake of her head, refused, then she vanished through the stage door. The crowd moved away. To be pitied? Oh dear no. To be envied, because they had seen that fairy-tale princesses can come true. That's glamour."

Ferdie looked at him with reproach.

"We've been watching it for over five years."

But Ambrose was carried away and did not notice the interruption.

"I went back to my studio and tried to think of other things, but she lodged in my mind, so I sat at my piano, and saw her. Exquisite, remote. That night I wrote 'Mermaid' and a week later, the Blues number, 'Oh, Lady of my Delight' and the sketch 'Meet Gloria Blonde.' I've done the other stuff for her since, but those three are for her and nobody else. If I don't have her, L.L., you can't have those."

L.L. took some quick steps about the room.

"She'll be so damned expensive."

Ambrose played the love-song.

"Not to you perhaps, as you gave her her first chance."

Ferdie yawned.

"That's a funny story."

"I suppose you'll have to have your way." L.L. turned to Ambrose. "I like having her in the theatre. She's always brought me luck. Even this last show hasn't lost any money yet."

"There's a little thing you two haven't thought of." Ferdie lit a cigarette. "Virginia won't sign any contract if she hears there's a girl being brought in for the ballet."

"Oh, surely not," Ambrose protested; "the girl must know she's not up to the standard of that sort of stuff."

"You know, L.L.," Ferdie said, "I think he'd better meet Virginia, it might make things easier."

L.L. continued his perambulations.

"Of course we can just sign her up to star if it comes to that. After all, nobody knows about the ballet but we three and George, and he's still in America."

"That ought to be all right," Ambrose agreed happily. "After all, why should she mind about the ballet, it's only about twenty minutes or so of the show."

Ferdie sighed.

"And only the best bit of music you ever wrote, and only George K. Gene being brought over to arrange it, and it's only bound to get all the critics and all the writes-up. Oh dear no, Virginia won't mind."

"Well, it's nearly lunch-time; let's go and have

a drink." L.L. opened the door. "I'll have a talk with Virginia to-morrow, and see if I can persuade her." He turned to Ferdie. "Will you remind me when George comes over that I saw a kid in pantomime might do for the ballet? Only one of Madame Elise's little treasures, but I thought her remarkable. If he passes her, she won't cost anything, and then if Virginia's reasonably cheap——"

"Little optimist," said Ferdie.

Mouse and Flossie were having lunch. Mouse laid down her knife and fork.

"Not bad lamb." Flossie looked pained, she knew it to be the height of ill manners to discuss what you were eating. Mouse saw the look and grinned. "Sorry, with all your efforts I can't improve my ways. But you're going to get rid of me. Jasmine rang up this morning while you were out, she has taken a house near Deal where the children can get over the measles, she wants me to stay with her. I'll be there till September."

Flossie raised her eyebrows.

"Somebody I know will have something to say about that, won't he? He'll miss coming here in the evenings."

"His name is Jim Menton, and the answer's 'No.' He's coming to Deal each evening. The point is, would you like to rent the flat?"

"Rent it? Do you mean take the whole of it?"

"Yes, I shall let it. I'm offering you the first refusal."

"What do you want me to pay?"

"Vell, Mrs. Goldsmid, to you it will be eight guineas a week."

"Eight? But that's more than it costs you."

"But there's my furniture and I'm throwing Mrs. Hodge in with it."

"Shouldn't dream of paying it."

"Right, then will you move out on Saturday?"

"Well, I can stay in my own room, I suppose."

"Of course not, I'm going to let the flat."

Flossie looked at her in fury. Could there be a meaner person in the world? she wondered. Eight guineas a week? How could she move? Everybody knowing her telephone number, and Mrs. Hodge used to her ways. Besides, where should she move to? Things would be very difficult in an hotel, men were so odd. Besides, if she moved into one, or a flat, it had to be very expensive; people would expect her to take something expensive. But eight guineas!

Mouse watched her face with amusement.

"Shall I ring?" she asked sweetly. Flossie nodded, Mouse went to the bell. Mrs. Hodge pushed the door open with her tray. She looked up at her. "I've just been telling Miss Virginia I'm going away until September."

Mrs. Hodge rested her tray on her hip.

"Are you, dear? Where?"

"Lady Menton has taken a house near Deal."

"I think we rang for Mrs. Hodge to clear," said Flossie coldly.

Mrs. Hodge gave Mouse a wink and began collecting the attachments to the meat course.

"Well, that will be nice for you. Lovely part, I hear. I was never there meself. I had a fortnight by the sea once, Lowestoft it was, the 'orspital sent me there after I had Georgie. Oh, it was grand." She picked up the vegetable dish. "I been down to Margate and Southend, and Clacton for bank holidays since, but not to stay, 'aven't 'ad a chance since Alfie was took."

Mouse made a mental note to see if some time a seaside holiday could not be arranged.

"I'm going to let the flat, I'm suggesting Miss Virginia takes it."

"Oh." Mrs. Hodge looked anxiously at Virginia. She yielded to no one in her admiration of her on the stage, but at home she found her difficult. 'Funny, Virginia is,' she confided to her friends, 'I suppose it's her being Royal makes her stand-offish, but she's not easy like Miss Shane; the laughs her and me have, you wouldn't berlieve.' All the same, difficult or not, she would be someone to pay the wages, she'd known people try to let their flats before, and even if they let them, there was no saying the new people would take her on to do for them.

"You'd be all right, miss," she said encouragingly. "I'd have more time to look after you with Miss Shane away."

Flossie looked at her coldly.

"This is hardly the time to discuss it. Will you bring the sweet, please?"

Mrs. Hodge, cast down by her tone, and the thought of being out of work, went out without a glimmer of a smile at Mouse, and quietly brought in the tart and departed again, and shut the door.

"It's no good biting Mrs. Hodge's head off, or scowling at me," Mouse said cheerfully, helping the tart; it's not much I'm asking, and God knows you can afford it. I know L.L. had to raise your salary ten pounds if he kept you on to finish a run after your contract expired, that means you're getting forty."

Flossie wriggled her shoulders.

"It's all very well for you to talk as if I were a millionaire. It isn't much with all I've got to do with it."

"Oh, for God's sake can that stuff. Odd the way you never have been able to talk naturally to your Auntie Mouse. I don't want to pry into your affairs, I don't care what you do with your money, but don't try and put that 'I'm only a poor little girl' business over on me. Now eat your tart, and don't break a million hearts by putting a wrinkle on that forehead. You'll have to pay up and you know it,

it's too inconvenient to move."

Flossie folded her napkin, and got up; she was intensely royal.

"I shall not discuss it. I will take the flat. As you say, it will be inconvenient to me to move. But I hope you feel ashamed." She opened the door and swept into the sitting-room.

"I shan't, ma'am," Mouse called to her back, "and you didn't wait for my curtsy." She paused for the sitting-room door to be closed and then popped her head into the kitchen. Mrs. Hodge was eating her dinner. "You old fool, you didn't really think I was throwing you out of a job, did you? But it's worked a treat. She's taking it and paying me eight guineas a week, and I'm living free till September. Won't the creditors be pleased? I'll even pay the dentist." She went gaily into the passage, and then remembered she had something else to say to Flossie. This sobered her, she loathed interfering in other people's business, but Jim had spoken to her about it, and Jasmine on the phone that morning had said she must speak. She hesitated. Flossie was in a bad temper, this was a wretched moment, perhaps to-morrow, but how unlikely Flossie would be in to-morrow except in the early morning, always an unsatisfactory time. She pushed open the sitting-room door with a now-or-never gesture. She looked at Flossie; her face as usual expressed nothing, she was lying in an arm-chair polishing the nails of one

hand on the palm of the other. Mouse lit a cigarette. She leant against the mantelpiece where she could look down on her.

"It's six years that you've lived with me, and you'll give it me that in that time I've never interfered with you."

Flossie raised surprised eyes.

"Of course not. Why should you?"

"Well, I'm going to now. Can you do something about Derwent?"

Flossie went on polishing her nails.

"What about him?"

"He's drinking like a fish, and generally going to bits."

"I suppose Jim Menton's been talking about me."

"He's not blaming you, he's blaming his own stupidity in letting you meet."

Flossie's eyes flashed.

"He only did that because he wanted Ossie to give him a job, and he knew Ossie'd come to stay if I was coming. It was pretty obvious. I've never been asked since, as I'm not wanted to be useful about anything."

Impatiently Mouse flicked some ash into the fire-place.

"How can you be so silly, Virginia? Why should they suppose it would amuse you staying with them? They're not your contemporaries, Meriel's nearer your age."

"Say what you like," Flossie said sulkily, "but I know."

Mouse looked at her consideringly. She was making a mess of this; she steered back to her objective.

"Derwent's no good to you, you don't want to be bothered with him. Why don't you tell him so once and for all, and make it quite clear that you won't see him?"

"What good will that do?"

"A friend of the family has offered to take him big-game shooting. You know the dear old traditional method of curing a broken heart."

"Well, I'm not stopping him going."

"Oh yes, you are. As long as there's a chance on earth that you'll see him, he won't budge."

Flossie looked at the floor. If there was one thing she hated, it was being pushed into corners where she had to make decisions; she liked things to drift, she hated this direct sort of talking. It was true she didn't want Derwent, penniless yard of misery that he was, but after all, he was Jim's heir and so useful as a well-connected person to make an extra man if one were wanted. Besides, as a love-sick caller at the stage door, he was just what the gallery liked, he created the right sort of atmosphere with his desperate face and miserable eyes. Of course now he had taken to drink it wasn't so funny, he looked so queer sometimes, she was almost afraid of him. All

the same, if the Mentons were going to fuss about him, and this talk from Mouse must have started with them, he had his uses. Stuck-up beasts, they thought they'd only got to ask for a thing to get it. She'd show them. She would pretend to do what they wanted, and really keep him just where she wanted him. In a month or two they wouldn't be sending Mouse with messages, they'd come and beg themselves. Or perhaps instead, she would pretend to be working with them, that would mean lots of meetings and week-ends. She gave a pleased smile, invisible to Mouse; stupid of her not to have thought before that she could make use of that wet fool.

"Poor boy," she said sweetly. "I'll see what I can do."

CHAPTER XVII

It was at the third rehearsal of Ambrose's revue "Tread On It" that Flossie learnt about the ballet. Monty Paile, who was producing the dancing numbers, had just finished working out with her and the three Polsky Brothers the routine for 'When the Sun Sets on London.'

"Well, that'll do for the moment," he said, "we'll come back to it." He turned to the chorus. "Come on, girls, take the gum out of your mouths and jump to it."

Virginia spotted L.L. in the stalls; she wanted to speak to him about the design for her dress for 'Oh, Lady of my Delight,' so she joined him. He got up on seeing her, and pulled down the seat of the tip-up chair next to him. He nodded at a man sitting on his other side.

"George, this is Virginia. Virginia, this is Mr. Gene. George K. Gene, in fact."

Flossie smiled charmingly and did some rapid thinking. George K. Gene. She knew the name. Where had she heard it? She decided to leave the dress discussion for the moment, it might be that this man was worth bothering with. He was an American, she liked Americans, she had always

found that they knew how to treat people. As a feeler she asked:

"Have you been over long?"

"No, just run over to put this on, only docked this morning."

'Put this on.' Put what on? Ferdie was producing as usual and there was Monty come in to do the dances, and then suddenly thinking of dances it came to her. That show at the Coronet, the ballet 'Locomotion.' She had thought it hideous, and very dull, and way down inside her she had known that she had not understood what it was about, but it had been an enormous success, the papers had been full of it, and it had kept quite a drab show running for months, and George K. Gene had done the choreography, that was why she knew his name. What on earth was he doing here? It was the first she had heard of a ballet.

"Are you going to produce a ballet?"

George looked at her in amazement, he had supposed the fact that he was going to produce a ballet at the Princess's to be the one topic of conversation, not only in the theatre, but throughout intelligent London.

"Of course."

Flossie looked delightedly at L.L. A ballet produced by George K. Gene was an event, sufficiently an event for her, had he told her about it, to have knocked that fifty-five pounds off her salary that

he was so anxious about; it would have been worth it for the publicity. It did not strike her that somebody else might be engaged for it, because she had made a name as a dancer. In each of the shows she had been in, a special dance had been arranged for her to do on her points, and very prettily and trippingly she did it. Her knees might not be as straight as the hypercritical might wish, and there might be more of careful training than inspiration in her movements, but in the musical comedy world she was considered decidedly a dancer.

"A ballet. That's good news. Naughty L.L. not to tell me." She turned to George. "Tell me about it, is it very difficult?"

She expected him to say: "Not too difficult for you," with his eyes saying all the things his tongue left out. Instead he looked at L.L. L.L. refused to catch the glance, but stared fixedly at the stage.

"It's not your sort of stuff, Virginia, ballet called 'Le Monde,' very modern, ugly dresses."

"Who is dancing it then?" her voice was like chips of ice.

"Nobody you'd have heard of, except Leonide Stalsky. It's all laid in a street, dozens of small bits; the girls will do those, and the Polsky brothers are dancing."

"Yes." Flossie's voice was full of kindly interest which did not deceive L.L. for a second. "And the ballerina?"

"Oh, her." L.L.'s tone reduced the part to a minimum. "A kid called Daisy Whichart. She trained at Madame's, by the way—I suppose you never ran into her?"

Flossie, as the great star coming to the Academy for special practice classes, took no interest in the pupils, she would choose times to attend when they would not be there. "I don't want to run into the great unwashed," she would say to Muriel. Sometimes, over a cigarette after the lesson, she would ask in a kindly way if anybody was coming on well, not that she was interested, but poor Muriel was such a hard-working old thing, she didn't mind pleasing her. Dimly now at the back of her mind she recalled one of these conversations. Hadn't Muriel said she had found a wonderful child? It had gone in at one ear and out at the other. She did wish she had attended.

"You've been very secret about this ballet." Her tone was nasty. "However ugly it is, I think I should have been asked if I wished to dance it."

George had been watching her stepping 'When the Sun Sets on London,' he grinned at her cheerfully.

"You couldn't do it, baby." Flossie looked at L.L.; surely as her manager he wouldn't let such an outrage pass. But L.L. was gazing at the stage, his eyes never moved. "You see," George went on cheerfully, "it's none of your pretty stuff that any

fool can fake."

When angry, Flossie's eyes were blue as the Mediterranean. They were just that colour as she turned them to George.

"Were you by any chance calling me a fool?"

L.L.'s eyes goggled with sheer fright, he pretended he was deaf.

"Course not, sister," said George mildly, "I just meant——"

Whatever he meant was lost in a slap on his face which rang through the quiet theatre.

There was a break in the rehearsal. Monty Paile was discussing an effect with Ferdie, the stage manager was hovering round in case he was wanted, and the assistant stage manager, script in hand, had his ears stretched for anything he ought to put down in the book. The girls were gathered in a group admiring the cut of the new practice knickers of one of their number. The Polsky Brothers had moved to the side of the stage where they were quietly limbering up. The unmistakable sound of the slap swung all the heads round. Ferdie, who was near the footlights, by using his hand as an eyeshade was able to see as far as the third row of the stalls, to the famous George K. Gene holding his cheek in his hand, to Flossie standing ready to hit him again, to L.L. who had got her by the wrist. Like a monkey he climbed along the edge of the stage box, swung himself into the stalls, came

quietly behind Flossie, and put his arm round her waist.

"Come on, old girl."

'Old girl!' She was angry already, but that was the last straw. That she should be called 'old girl' in the theatre where no one was allowed to forget what blood ran in her veins. In one second, almost six years of culture slipped off her as if they had never existed, she completely let herself go; bottled up as she had been all these years, she behaved as no one would have behaved in the Fordham Road. She lay down and screamed, she kicked, she bit Ferdie's hand. He, the two stage managers, and the Polsky Brothers, had all they could do to get her to her dressing-room. As her struggling form was borne out of sight, and her screams grew less deafening, the twenty-four dancers looked at each other; they said nothing, for Monty called them to work, but in their faces was complete satisfaction. It was the best few minutes they had enjoyed for ages.

"Bill," called the electrician to the props, "what was that? Somebody trod on the cat?"

Bill jabbed a brushful of paint on a vase.

"That was 'er Royal 'ighness 'avin' a nice attack of what they call no-bless-oblige, and I don't mind 'aving a tanner on it that Mr. Ferdie Carme won't 'alf oblige 'er when 'e gets 'er upstairs."

The electrician climbed down a ladder and came over to him.

"Wouldn't mind doing that meself. What I've put up with with 'er! 'Oh, Virginia says the spot wasn't on 'er, and Virginia says the lights was wrong on 'er entrance.' F—ing little B, one day there'll be a black-out on 'er entrance, and then just one spot, and that'll be in a place that'll surprise 'er. I've just about finished, what about one?"

"You've said it." Bill laid down his paint and brushes. "Somebody must 'ave told 'er Royal 'ighness what they think of 'er, and that's worth a drink any day of the week."

In the stalls L.L. looked apologetically at George.

"Sorry, old man. Hope she didn't hurt you."

"No." George straightened his tie. "I almost wish she could dance, I like 'em tough."

Ferdie pushed Flossie on to the sofa in her dressing-room, and with a jerk of his head told the other men to get out. After a few moments she quieted, she lay on her face, turning her head just sufficiently to see that Ferdie had drawn a chair up beside her and was quietly lighting a cigarette. She made no sign that she had seen him, she did not want to see anybody, her whole body flushed, and the nerve centre below her waist felt as though a Girl Guide had practised knot-tying with it. 'God! What a show she had made of herself! Behaved like a fish-wife and that in front of the chorus, and some of the stage staff. What an unutterable fool, and how miserably lacking in self-control.' She mustered her

courage and dignity and got off the sofa and repaired her face, and combed her hair, then she faced Ferdie.

"I've made a fool of myself."

Ferdie was furious, he had promised himself that he would tell this girl all he had been longing to say for years, and now she was disarming him by the one quality which could disarm him quicker than any other. Courage in defeat.

"You certainly have."

"Mind you," Flossie drew herself up, "I had a right to be angry with that miserable American, but I was a fool to behave the way I did."

"What'd he say?"

"That I couldn't dance the ballet. He said it was too difficult, that it wasn't pretty stuff a fool could do."

"Well," Ferdie blew a ring of smoke up to the ceiling, "he was quite right." Flossie made a movement. "Now, don't slap my face, but have a cigarette and you'll feel better." He passed her his case. "The trouble with you, Virginia, is that you think you're perfect. Well, your body is, nobody'd argue about that, but you're not great shakes as a performer." She made a quick movement. "Smoke that cigarette and listen, I'm doing you a kindness telling you all this. Given the right stuff and the right producer—and that's me—you can put it over as well as anybody, better than most, because you've

got the appearance and personality, but that's not saying you're bursting with talent. You owe most of what you've got to me. I've worked harder over you than any girl I ever handled, and the result is you're a star earning a salary that'd make a bishop take to green gaiters, so don't get sitting around thinking you're all the works, just remember there are a few things you can't do."

Flossie never had cared for arguments with Ferdie, so she returned to the original trouble.

"But I am engaged to be the star of 'Tread On It.' The ballet will be one of the big things in it, so I ought to dance it."

"If L.L. decided to put on a scene from 'Romeo and Juliet' would you say you had to be Juliet?"

"Yes. Why not?"

Ferdie looked at her despairingly.

"Why not? Because for every actor there's a nice big open drain waiting and you'd only have to say one line as Juliet and what a plop. Now keep your temper. You've got some grand stuff in this show, go all out for it, make it such a knock-out that nobody thinks about the ballet." He got up. "As for the fuss this morning, forget it, everyone's allowed their bit of temperament, even royalty must act natural sometimes."

Flossie realised that as far as the ballet was concerned she was beaten. But she still had her huge salary, and Ferdie was right when he said some of

her stuff was good. She was calming down, she felt she wouldn't mind so much as long as they didn't try and make a fuss of this dancer.

"What about this dancer L.L.'s found?"

"A little kid called Daisy Whichart. Did you ever notice her sister, a tall pretty girl we had in 'Mississippi Baby,' had an affair with Dolly Kismet?" Flossie shook her head, she never knew the chorus by sight. "Well, it doesn't matter, because this kid's not a bit like her, something right out of the nursery. Got a nurse brings her to rehearsals."

"As a stunt?"

"No, that's what I thought at first, but it's on the level. Believe me, you've nothing to worry about there, she'll dance and then Nanny'll take her home to bye-bye. Who're you lunching with?"

Flossie frowned. She was lunching with Derwent. She had arranged it to annoy somebody else, but now she felt she wished she hadn't arranged it, Derwent was such a misery, staring at her with sheep's eyes. She looked at her watch.

"At the Berkeley."

"Well, go home and put on your best frock, and smile all through lunch so all the world can see that you're on top of everything, and be back at half-past two sharp, we'll manage without you for the rest of the morning." He gave her a most unroyal smack.

Derwent sat almost in silence gazing at Flossie while she, with heat and fervour, poured the story of her trouble over the ballet into his uncomprehending ears. It was a pity she was in this mood, he had so much he wanted to say and it was no good starting till she had finished. His hand that held his glass shook, the irises of his eyes were a bit pink. Oh, dear God, she was lovely. What was the good of people telling him to go away? Why, even if he went to the darkest corner of Africa she would be with him, hers was not a face you could forget, and even if you could forget her face, there was her body; the man wasn't born who could forget her body. It wouldn't be so bad if only he could sleep; nights of half satisfied dreams and wholly dissatisfied wakings, that was what got you down. They said she was hard and mercenary. Quite likely it was true, but he wanted her, and that want blocked out all else there might be in the world. If only people would leave him alone. Ossie Bone with his offers of jobs on papers abroad, he had tried to persuade himself they were made because Ossie was jealous and wanted him out of the way, but he couldn't fool himself. Why should Ossie care if he went or stayed while Virginia treated him like a dog? Just like a dog, whistled for when wanted. He had been whistled for to-day, why? Because two tables away Larry Sims was sitting and Larry was in her bad books; he hadn't given her something she said he

had promised. What a performance she was putting up, gazing into his eyes, and looking at him so lovingly, and all to annoy Larry. He fidgeted and looked at his watch, a quarter to two, and she was still chatting on about the ballet, and he hadn't begun to say the things he had come primed to say.

The waiter brought the coffee. Shakily he lit a cigarette, he dragged his eyes from hers, it was like dragging plaster off skin.

"I say, Virginia, do stop talking about this ballet, I've something I must say." His voice was desperate. "I can't go on like this. It's months since I slept properly, they all say I'm drinking too much, but what am I to do? I think I'd go mad without something to drink. Is there any hope for me? Suppose I had money, would you marry me?"

Flossie poured out the coffee.

"Are you coming into money?" she asked with interest.

"No. But if you would even say that you might marry me if I had money, I'd make some, I swear I would, even if it meant breaking into the Bank of England."

Virginia sipped her coffee.

"I wish you wouldn't talk in that silly way." Her voice was cold, but her eyes, for the sake of the glowering Larry, were affectionate.

"But if I did make money, would you?"

She leant forward and whispered intimately so

that the watching Larry writhed.

"Suppose I said 'No.' What would you do?"

For a fraction of a second Derwent hesitated, but he had come to this lunch prepared if necessary to burn his boats.

"Ossie's offered me a job abroad."

Only by the greatest effort could she maintain her smile. What a nerve Ossie had, going behind her back trying to take her men from her. Jealous, that's what it was. Well, he'd find out that for all his money he couldn't get everything he wanted. She laid her hand over Derwent's. Two tables away Larry, driven frantic, snatched a piece out of his pocket-book and began to scribble. Flossie looked into Derwent's eyes.

"Poor boy, does 'oo want to mawwy Jinny so terwibly." She paused while she did a little rapid thinking. Larry was folding a note which was obviously destined for her, so she need not trouble much more about Derwent. It would be a mistake now that he had served her purpose to encourage him; naturally he never would make money, so talk of marriage was merely silly. On the other hand, she had no intention of letting Ossie pack him off to some foreign country; he was useful now and again. Why must men always force the issue? As long as nobody ever made actual demands, life could be so pleasant. She took her hand off Derwent's. "You must be sensible, it's no good asking me if I'd marry

you if you had money because you haven't any." She saw his face, and felt it was time he had a spoonful of jam, "I'm very, very fond of you, Derwent."

"If I made money, would you?"

Oh goodness, how the man did keep on. If he made money, would she? But he never would, so why worry? She gave him a playful slap.

"Mustn't be naughty boy and worry Jinny. Would you like to have lovely treats?"

"What?" In spite of himself, and although he knew whatever she was going to suggest, it was for her pleasure not his, his voice was eager.

"Well, if you ask me to stay for a lubly long week-end at Jim and Jasmine's house by the sea, I'll come, and Derwent s'all dwive his Jinny down."

"But I can't, it's not my house."

Flossie gave a faint shrug with her shoulders, and picked up her gloves. At that moment the waiter brought her Larry's note. *How about supper to-night? I've something for you. L.* She nodded acceptance, murmuring 'Dear Larry,' and got up to go.

Swaying slightly, and with his face whitish-green, Derwent came round and stood in front of her.

"If I wangle the invitation to Deal, will you sleep with me?"

Flossie wanted to go to Deal, and that particular promise, as she knew from experience, was easily broken.

"Come on," she said, "drive me to the theatre."

"But will you?"

She gave him a look that sent his heart soaring.

Myra was sitting at her piano when Flossie was announced. She told the maid to bring cocktails.

"Tra la la, how nice to see you. How are rehearsals going? L.L. told me you'd started." Flossie sat and lit a cigarette, Myra took the tray of drinks from her maid. "Hey nonny nonny, you like it sweet, don't you?" Flossie nodded. "'Musing, the ballet sounds. Clever bastard, Ambrose. L.L. says it's a brilliant scrap he's found to dance 'Martelle,' only thirteen, he wants it put about she's fifteen." She passed over a cocktail. "Tell me if that's sweet enough."

"Lovely. You are doing the spreading for him, I suppose?"

Myra took a drink of her cocktail. So that was why she was being honoured with a visit. Jealous, was she? Silly to waste her time being that.

"Me, me, me, me, me! I can't help there, she really is a kid with a dragon of an old nurse, she'll just do her stuff and go home." She nodded at Flossie over her glass so that her ear-rings jangled. "Silly girl. Tra la la. Been worried she was going to steal your illuminations? Put it out of your mind." She crossed to the piano and put her cocktail down on the top of it, and sat on the stool and

ran her fingers up and down the keys. "All the same, you ought to work a little stunt before the first night. People aren't talking about you as much as they did."

Flossie came over to her and leant on the piano.

"What sort of stunt?"

Myra went on playing, but her eyes raked Flossie.

"What about marriage? Hey nonny nonny nonny nonny! About time you became a peeress."

She jumped up to get the cocktail-shaker. She filled both glasses. Flossie watched her out of the corner of her eye. A peeress! Extraordinary to hear your secret dream spoken of so casually. She wondered if Myra was sufficiently her friend to trust her with the truth. She, so successful in all else, was a failure at getting proposals of marriage. Of course there were penniless idiots like Derwent, but the titled were either married already or the proposals were for sleeping only.

"There's nobody very suitable for that," she said frankly.

"Me, me, me, me, me, pity; you might have had twins, nice publicity in twins. You'd better do the other thing then, get your name connected with somebody that matters, something young and good-looking, for preference an actor so you can go into the same show. The public will eat that sort of romance if it's handled properly. Me, me, me, me, me." She looked shrewdly at Flossie. "Do you good,

must use what you've got some day or you'll have moss sprouting."

Flossie threw up her head.

"Really, Myra!"

Myra played a scale.

"Sorry, only trying to be helpful. You might be dying for a day or two. Or stage an accident. An aeroplane one would be good, but they're apt to be fatal. Think about it, and talk it over with your publicity man, and let me know what you arrange, and I'll chatter to help on the good work." She played some bars of 'Little Girl Loves Little Boy' from 'Looby,' and allowed the present gleaming, glossy Virginia to fade into the gauche Flossie Elk who had stood by this same piano nearly six years ago. Funny, common, silly little thing, but what beauty! She re-focused the present Flossie, she had never been able to dislike her as most women did, she was too proud of her, no one could deny her perfection as an *objet d'art*. "I mean it, my dear. See that you are news before the curtain goes up on that revue."

Out in the street Flossie got into Ossie's car which was taking her to join him for an early meal before the show. She lay back against the cushions relaxed. A stunt! Make herself news! Myra had a nasty mind, as if a girl like her would let herself get talked about in the way she meant. All the same, Myra always talked sense, and if she said

people weren't talking about her as much as they did, it was the truth. Of course marriage would be one way, but the sort of marriages open to her weren't the sort Myra meant. A peeress! If only she could, she had taken enough trouble with all the unmarried peers she had met, but not one had come anywhere near a proposal except that Tilman boy, and his family had meanly taken him all the way to Japan. She sheered her mind off the efforts she had made, they were humiliating memories. Of course she ought to be a peeress, Myra was right there. Where she was wrong was in thinking that if she brought a good marriage off she would use it for publicity. She had long thought it ridiculous that one of her gifts should work for her living, in a confused way she saw her *métier* as châtelaine of a large house, being kind to the tenants and perhaps opening a bazaar or two. Catch her bothering with the stage then. A stunt! An accident! Her eyes narrowed and she ran over the various possibilities. Suddenly her face lit up, that was an idea, and just the right sort of publicity. 'It's a comfort,' she said to herself, 'that I've got brains.'

CHAPTER XVIII

OSSIE smacked at his ball and mentally cursed. He didn't mind a week-end by the sea, and he liked staying with the Mentons, but he did object to playing golf with a sulky young man in the hottest hours of the afternoon to fit in with some doubtless nefarious scheme of Virginia's. But what a clever baggage! He had to give her that, hot, cross, and feeling the weight of far too large a luncheon though he was. She wanted both him and Derwent out of the way apparently; why only she knew. He wouldn't be surprised if the only reason she had cadged an invitation for him was so that he should take Derwent off her hands this one afternoon. How neatly she'd arranged it. Promising the wretched young man that he should give her a golf lesson. He had wondered why she had said: 'Would kind Ossie take her to lunch in Deal?' She had said it was shopping, but that was a blatant lie; she never moved without enough luggage to withstand a fairly lengthy siege. How sweet she had been during the drive and over lunch; it was only when they turned golf-wards that he had seen where the day was leading. 'Would dear, kind Ossie play with Derwent, she wasn't feeling very well, she thought she would

have a quiet afternoon on the beach, Derwent would be so disappointed to miss his game.' He had protested, but not nearly strongly enough, and somehow, he had been dropped at the gates of the club-house, his chauffeur mysteriously producing his clubs; his car had driven away with Virginia waving kindly and telling him to enjoy himself. Enjoy himself! It was too hot for golf anyway, and the reception he got from Derwent would have dried up any powers of enjoyment. He was a fool really ever to have started the round. Derwent had his car, they could have gone home. From the moment he had delivered his message and heard the boy mutter: 'Double-crossing little beast,' he should have known that golf, or indeed any occupation which entailed his presence, was better avoided. It was the caddie-master's fault really; he had produced caddies so promptly that they were on the first tee before he had time to consider. He mopped his forehead—seemed a very steep course.

"It's your smack, Derwent."

Derwent turned a red, angry face to him.

"Right. I can take my own time, I suppose?"

Ossie had an inspiration.

"I say, this is the seventh, how about going to the ninth and calling it a day?"

Derwent felt distinct pleasure at the suggestion, but he was not going to appear better-tempered, he was wallowing in rage and felt he had every right to.

"Very well, if you're sick of it."

He lammed at his ball, and hooked it dismally. Ossie looked commiseratingly at the caddie who was certainly in for a long hot search. He felt silence was indicated, so he took up his stance, addressed the ball, and hit a beauty straight down the fairway. Derwent looked after it and said grudgingly:

"Shouldn't have that back." He turned to go and search for his own ball, and added casually, "If we finish, what shall we do?"

Ossie collected his wooden tee.

"I shall go on my bed, and if you'd any sense you'd do the same. As you haven't, I think from something that was let fall you'll find what you want on the beach."

Mouse having watched Jim and the three children go off to the beach, turned to Jasmine.

"Us chaps for a nice lie down?"

Jasmine nodded.

"Want to be called?"

"No; sure to wake about tea-time, but if you should open your eyes round about four and hear no movement in my room, you might, with the utmost care, give me a gentle stir." There was the sound of a car; she looked out of the window. "There's Virginia. Wonder what she's done with Ossie. I thought she was playing golf."

"She was to have had a lesson from Derwent." Jasmine stammered with indignation. "I could murder that girl. She's let him down as usual."

Mouse looked at her with an amused twinkle.

"You never will listen to your Auntie Mouse. I did say no good would come having her here."

Jasmine gave an exasperated shrug.

"I tried to be too clever. It sounds awful, Mouse, but confession's good for the soul. When Nephew Derwent said this week-end mattered more than I'd ever understand, I thought I knew what he meant. Obviously she's not marrying him, thank goodness, so I suppose she promised something else. Knowing the lady, I knew she wouldn't fulfil a promise like that, but I thought a showdown might clear his vision a little, so I put her in the room next to him and took away her key."

Mouse giggled.

"Really, Lady Menton, what goings on. That was not at all our dear Flossie's situation. I wonder what she did?"

"With Nephew Derwent sulking the entire morning, we know what she didn't do."

"The dear old feminine gag, I suppose."

"I suppose so. I've made a nasty muddle, the air's thicker than ever, and Derwent suicidal. Come on, let's nip up to our beds."

Flossie, a picture in blue linen with a large white hat in one hand, stood in the doorway.

"Hullo. I'm going on the beach."

Jasmine's tone was chilly.

"I thought Derwent was giving you a golf lesson."

"He was," Flossie wandered out into the hall, "but I wasn't feeling too good, and Ossie was crazy to have a game, it seemed selfish to break in. Bye-bye, I'm going to have a long, lazy afternoon on the beach."

Jasmine waited till the front door had shut, then she turned furiously to Mouse.

"She's so plausible. God! How I hate the little B."

Jim lay patiently on his back with a large stone on his chest which Meriel, Lucia, and Avis used as a target for smaller stones. Flossie, on arriving at the beach, paused by the group for a minute.

"Hullo," said Jim, "thought you were having a golf lesson."

"I was," she agreed, "but Ossie wanted a game and playing with me isn't any fun for Derwent, so I'm going to have a lovely rest on the beach." She moved away.

"Thank goodness," said Meriel, "she isn't having her lovely rest here."

Jim looked at her with amusement.

"Changed your mind since you've become a finished lady from Paris. I seem to remember a Christmas when you told me you thought her the

loveliest person in the world."

Meriel threw a neat shot and knocked the stone off his chest.

"That makes me four up." She replaced the stone. "Your turn, Lucia. I was only a child then, and I still think she's very pretty."

Avis turned round to look at Flossie's retreating back.

"I think she's got a silly face, but she always gives us chocolates."

Lucia dug like a dog among the pebbles looking for suitable ammunition.

"She doesn't buy those, men give them her because she's an actress."

Avis threw a stone and missed.

"Your turn, Meriel. Burnsie says that an actress's life is one of great temptation. Is it?"

Jim laughed so much that the stone jogged up and down on his chest.

"You must ask Virginia."

"All the same," Avis went on, "it must be nice being an actress. Is she clever, Daddy?"

"She can dance and sing, you know, and of course she looks lovely."

Meriel shook her shoulders.

"I don't think she's nearly as lovely as Mouse." Jim looked at her sharply. Could this nearly grown-up daughter have said that for him? Could she have noticed anything? But one glance dispelled the

idea. All the children adored Mouse and truculence in defence of an idol was a little hang-over from the schoolroom to prove she was still something of a child. "Mouse," she went on, "looks not only nice on the outside, but as if she'd be nice inside as well."

"She ought to be," said Avis, "she's had her tensils and her appendix out."

Lucia lay down flat on her back.

"Don't let's play any more. Goodness, I'm hot. Can't we bathe, Daddy?"

"Certainly not. On top of all that duck and green peas, not to mention several peaches and a green-gage or two. What a suggestion!"

Avis rolled over to him and rested her elbows on his stomach.

"How soon can we bathe?"

Jim groaned.

"Take your elbows off my lunch. You can go in just before tea if you like. I shall wait till afterwards for Mouse and Mummy."

Lucia wriggled her shoulders into the stones for more comfort, she shaded her eyes to watch a seagull.

"I wish we had measles every year. It's been lovely living here."

Nobody answered, the torpor of the hot afternoon held them all in drowsy contentment. Jim closed his eyes. It certainly had been a grand

summer. Living under one roof, he and Mouse had found something they had not had before, something uncommonly like contentment of soul.

Flossie scrambled up the groin. It was covered in barnacles, and slippery with seaweed and the sun was hot on her back, and she loathed climbing, but it was necessary; in about an hour, her waiting publicity man should have a story over the telephone which he could blazon on to the front pages of the Sunday papers, and in two or three hours after that, the camera men should be arriving. She looked over her shoulder at the group on the beach. Pity those three wretched flappers were there, she did hope none of them would spoil everything by trying to save her. Her publicity man had said that nothing could be better than her rescue by Jim Menton, he was just the kind of peer and family man that the public would like to have do a deed like that. She reached the top of the groin and sat down at the extreme end dangling her legs over the edge. It looked a nasty drop into the sea from here, and she knew the water was deep, and that there was a bit of a current. She looked back at the beach and measured the distance from her to Jim with her eye. No, it couldn't take long, not long enough for her to drown, he knew she couldn't swim and was bound to hurry. Oh dear, she wished it was over and she safely on the beach

being revived with brandy. Better get on with it. She sat on a slippery patch of seaweed, and gave herself a push. As she fell, she screamed.

Jim leapt up.

"Stop where you are, all of you, she can't swim a stroke, so she'll probably struggle. I'll get her." He snatched off his shoes and took a header. It was no distance to Flossie, but almost immediately he was in great distress with stabbing pains round his heart; it was an appalling struggle to breathe. Somehow he got to her and gave her a push which landed her against the groin. "Hold on. Don't struggle, you little fool, I'm nearly done. Meriel. Help!" he gasped and sank.

Like a lot of fishes the three girls shot through the water.

Derwent drove home very fast, he chose the coast road because it was quickest. He would just drop old Bone, and change his things. The car turned a corner and they came in sight of the beach where they bathed. Ossie put his hand on his arm.

"I say, what's happening?"

Derwent looked, and slammed down the accelerator. At the top of the cliff path, another car was standing. They could see Jim lying on his back, and somebody, obviously a doctor, attending to him. The three girls were huddled together, and some way off, Flossie. All the party except the doctor were

soaked. Derwent parked behind the other car, and raced down the path with Ossie panting behind him. At the bottom they came on a chauffeur. Derwent ran on, but Ossie paused to ask what had happened.

The chauffeur touched his cap.

"It was a bathing accident I gathered from the young lady, sir, but they were all out of the water time we came along. The young lady was in the road, and she stopped us and asked us to go for a doctor, but my gentleman is a doctor so he runs down and he tells me to rig up something that would do for a stretcher. I brought this," he held out a motor rug, "it's strong, it's the best I could do. I believe a gate's the right thing, but there don't seem to be no gate."

Jim's face was greenish yellow, he had endured agonies of pain and violent attacks of sickness followed by retching, from which he had sunk into unconsciousness. The doctor had given him an injection, he was still holding the syringe, the fingers of the other hand were on his pulse.

Derwent knelt down by his uncle. He exclaimed: "Jim!" under his breath. The doctor looked up.

"You a relative?"

"Nephew. What happened?"

"That girl," he nodded at Flossie, "fell into the water, I gather. He went in to pull her out, and it's got his heart."

"But he's always bathing."

"Must have been too soon after a meal. Who is he?"

"Lord Menton."

"Oh. Are those the daughters?" He glanced over at the three girls who were staring in silence at their father. Derwent nodded. "Is Lady Menton about?"

"Up at the house."

The doctor turned and smiled at Meriel.

"Will you take my chauffeur and go with your sisters and tell your mother your father isn't very well. My car can bring her back here."

"Is Daddy bad?" asked Lucia.

The doctor was bent over Jim. He didn't look up.

"He'll be all right. Hurry off and get your mother."

Flossie stared at the group round Jim, she heard the car move off. Jasmine would be here soon, that was a good thing, perhaps she could do something. She was looking, and feeling, ill; she had fainted when she had been brought to the beach. She had suffered from shock, for she had supposed her last moment had come when Jim, instead of rescuing her, had merely pushed her towards the groin and had then sunk. It was Avis who had pulled her out, Meriel and Lucia had saved their father. She had been unconscious for only a few minutes, but she had lain stretched out with her eyes shut and ears

singing for quite a time. When she began to feel better, she was struck by the lack of attention being paid to her and sat up to find that Jim was ill. She had turned her head away—how disgusting to see somebody being sick—and had lain back with a moan hoping to attract some attention to herself. It was when Meriel brought the doctor that she realised that something was seriously wrong. She heard him say to the children that they were not to worry, that he was a heart specialist, and knew just what to do. But the way he snatched open his bag, and got out things, and snapped at his chauffeur to get hold of something to do as a stretcher, made her scared. It was awful sitting doing nothing, the fearful sounds from Jim, and the way the three girls clung together, never a look at her to see if she was all right. The doctor was very tense, but people didn't die from swimming a little way. All the same, it was awkward he was ill, she'd have to get up to the house and telephone; must make it clear that this had been a real accident. She was thankful to see Derwent and Ossie, but they weren't paying any attention to her. This was a horrid afternoon.

The doctor, who had been holding Jim's pulse, suddenly put down his hand. He got up.

"My God!" said Derwent. "He's not dead?"

"Dead?" Flossie's voice, a thin, hysterical shriek, reached Mouse and Jasmine as they came down the cliff path. She heard them and turned round. "Oo,

here's Jasmine. Who's going to tell her?"

Derwent whispered to Ossie:

"Stop Mouse and break it to her."

Mouse was ahead of Jasmine, she heard the whisper. She was a vivid, gay figure in pink linen. Ossie and Derwent moved quickly between her and Jim's body. She stood still.

"Nobody need break it to her, she knows." She held out her hand behind her and groped for, and found, Jasmine's. They stood like that while servants from the house and the doctor's chauffeur covered Jim with a rug and carried him away. Jasmine released her hand.

"I must go to the children." She turned to the doctor. "Would you drive me up? I must get there before Jim."

Mouse did not seem to notice she had gone, she smiled in a vague way at Derwent and Ossie.

"Well, chaps, that seems to be that."

Ossie's face twitched.

"What about you coming to town in my car? I'll sit in front, you can have it to yourself."

Mouse nodded.

"Yes. See my things are sent on, Derwent, I'll be in the way here."

Flossie's brain was recovering from the shock of hearing that Jim was dead. Jasmine and the doctor had gone to the house, it wouldn't be safe to ring up from there. She had best get back to the flat,

and get her publicity man to come and see her. Then she had a fearful thought. Where was Mouse going to stay? She, of all people, must never know.

"Where are you going to stay, Mouse?"

Mouse seemed to see her for the first time.

"Oh, you're here. The flat, of course."

"But you can't, I've taken it for another month."

Derwent stared at her, horrified.

"Shut up, Virginia," said Ossie.

But Mouse gave a half-giggle.

"Don't blame her, she didn't hold with my illicit ways in life, you can't expect her to respect them in death." Suddenly her face crumpled, it was as if her own light remark had been the means of driving home the truth. Her eyes were frenzied, she held her mouth with both hands to check a scream.

Ossie put his arm round her.

"Take your car," he said to Derwent, "and tell my man to bring mine down at once. Run like hell. I'll look after her."

Flossie had supposed herself too weak to move, but to be left disregarded on the beach, catching her death of cold in soaking clothes and nobody caring, gave her strength. Besides, something quite desperate had got to be done. She couldn't go to town in Ossie's car because Mouse would be there, and her business must be a secret from them both. Derwent couldn't drive her up because he mustn't

know either, and anyway, obviously he would have to stay here. She was panting after Derwent when this last thought came to her. She stopped dead, her face radiant. That running figure in front of her wasn't poor Derwent any more. That was the new Lord Menton.

In a dark corner of the least frequented of station hotels, Flossie met her publicity agent. He had gathered from the breathless way she had rung him up from Deal that something was wrong. He gave her a drink. He was very sorry for her, everybody must put on a stunt now and then; you couldn't be blamed if somebody died on you. However, he didn't take that tone with Flossie, seeing that she was already slightly hysterical. Instead he persuaded her it had been a real accident. It was so easy to imagine that you had done a thing on purpose, just because you had discussed it. But it had never really happened. She must be a good, brave girl and not let herself get fanciful. He gave her another drink, and put her into a taxi, and hurried off to Fleet Street to see that she figured in the tragedy in the best possible light.

It was not till she reached the door of the flat that Flossie remembered that Mouse would be there. Oh well, that didn't matter now that everything was settled so nicely. She hoped she wouldn't make a scene. She was sorry for her, of course, but

she must realise that if you had affairs with people and they died, you couldn't possibly expect to be treated as though you were a widow, and she must realise too that, however upset she was, she couldn't expect to live free in a flat somebody else had paid the rent of. She'd have to hand the money back; it was to be hoped she hadn't spent it.

Mouse's bedroom door was open, and Mouse lying on the bed. She looked up as Flossie came in. Her face was shapeless with crying. Flossie was shocked. No matter what happened, nobody ought to let themselves go like that.

"Where's Ossie?" she asked.

"Gone to get some champagne."

"Champagne!" Flossie thought that was no drink in which to drown a sorrow and her voice showed it. "Could you drink it?"

"I could drink anything."

She looked so unspeakably wretched that Flossie was sorry.

"I say," she began, "I'm awfully——"

"Leave it," Mouse stopped her, "things couldn't well be worse."

Flossie's eyes widened, an awful suspicion came to her. 'Couldn't well be worse?' No wonder she was upset.

"You're not going to have a baby, are you?"

Mouse began to laugh, one shrill mirthless sound piled on another.

"No," she gasped. "God knows when to say 'joke over.'"

Two days later the telephone rang. Mouse picked up the receiver. Jasmine's voice came stuttering over the wire.

"Are you coming to the funeral, Mouse?"

"Yes."

"Who're you going with?"

"By myself."

"Don't do that, come down early and drive with me."

There was a pause, then Mouse gave the ghost of a giggle.

"That ought to hand everyone a nice laugh."

Jasmine caught her breath.

"Well, you see, ducky, I'd like to have you."

Mouse gripped the receiver.

"Macabre, you chaperoning Jim and me for the last time."

Her tone was more than Jasmine could stand, her voice broke.

"Don't, sweet. Come early. 'Bye."

CHAPTER XIX

MOUSE was having her breakfast. Jasmine sat on the end of her bed.

"It's grand to have you back. I'd hoped to get down to meet you at Southampton, but I've been so busy moving. How was foreign parts?"

"Very foreign. All alike after the eighteenth port. I take it very kind of you to drop in this early."

"Well, I couldn't face us meeting at Nephew Derwent's nuptials. Must have a word with you first. You are going this afternoon, I suppose?"

"Going! I'm being 'dearest friend of bride.' I've been invited to help her into the going-away dress."

"Taking it by and large, she's got a nerve."

"Not at all. She just thinks she's being kind to poor Mouse. Who told you I was back?"

"Ossie. You didn't write much; he's been my only source of information as to your goings on."

"No, it seemed a complete break with everything was indicated." She poured out her second cup of coffee. "Extraordinary fellow, Ossie. You know the day he walked in here with the tickets for the trip, and the cheque for clothes and everything, he was a revelation to me."

Jasmine lit a cigarette, and in the pause she recalled Ossie's coming to her, his funny shyness. 'This may seem unusual to you, Lady Menton, but I want to send Mouse away. Perhaps you would use your influence to get her to accept a little help.' He had coughed to hide his embarrassment. 'She's a very unhappy woman.' The reason for unhappiness was, of course, not mentioned. She glanced at Mouse. The long sea trip seemed to have done its work. There were a few new lines on her face, a few more grey hairs, but her beauty was undimmed; only in her eyes could you see that she had been ravaged by suffering, and they were belied by her smile and the set of her head. It was plain she had not come back with wounds to exhibit. Mouse spread a piece of toast with butter.

"How's the bride?"

"Oh, lovely. Look at the picture papers. When I came past the church this morning it was buzzing with florists, and there were yards of red carpet, and miles of awnings, bell-ringers have been engaged to ring for three hours, and camera men have been lying on the roof of her hotel all night, and are in squadrons outside the church."

Mouse giggled.

"It's going to be a magnificent affair."

"It's not nearly grand enough for Virginia. She wanted to drive in an open carriage, and she would have liked to have had the streets decorated. After

all, royalty isn't married every day."

Mouse sighed appreciatively.

"She's a grand girl."

"Grand!" Jasmine stuttered with indignation. "When I think of this wedding I want to be sick. Virginal white flowers, 'Praise to the Holiest in the Heights,' blessings. It's indecent, it's making a mock."

"Make a mock nothing," Mouse said firmly. "Virginia's one of the few brides who has a right to veils and white draperies. She has earned the blessing of the Church; in spite of every temptation she goes to the altar a virgin."

"But in every other way, what a little beast."

"In the eyes of the God-fearing she's good in the only way that matters, and good, mind you, from conviction. She was honestly shocked at the goings on of us others. And, mark you, she'll be a success as Lady Menton."

Jasmine nodded gloomily.

"Don't I know it. She's had several serious talks with me. She says 'We'—and by that she means royalty and the aristocracy, she belonging to both, you understand—have a duty to the country. She says we stand for the sacredness of home life, and must never forget to set an example to those beneath us."

Mouse lit a cigarette.

"Isn't that just lovely? How lucky for the

country to have people like Virginia to look up to. How about Derwent? Does he have a proper appreciation of the dignity of his station?"

"He doesn't think at all. He says he's so lucky it makes him afraid that something will happen before he gets to the altar. In between thinking how lucky he is, he's working very hard. Virginia has pulled a wire or two and got him into Jim's shoes; he'll finish as a director, shouldn't wonder."

"There isn't much money, is there?"

"But there will be. Virginia seems to have some mysterious sources of perfectly reliable information. She has already improved Derwent's financial position."

"What's happening to you?"

"There's enough. The tenants were angels about moving out of the Dower House, and it won't cost much to keep up. It's unfortunately near the Place. The girls are being so difficult, you know how intolerant they are at that age, they talk about Virginia as if she'd murdered Jim."

"Refreshingly outspoken."

Jasmine got up and collected her bag.

"What are you doing this morning?"

Mouse hesitated.

"Had Jim told you about the Elks?"

"Pa and Ma? I knew vaguely they existed. What are they like? Frightful?"

"She's a poor fool, but he's grand. I'm going

down to their house to push her into a wedding garment."

"They're coming to the wedding then?"

"Yes, Virginia doesn't know, but they are. I got L.L. to see they were sent an invitation, and he wangled it somehow so that the answer came to him. I've borrowed Ossie's car to fetch them, and old Madame Elise who taught Virginia to dance is giving them lunch and taking them with her to church and reception."

"Whom are you going with?"

"Oh, some place on the bride's side of the aisle. I thought I might park myself between Ossie and L.L."

"Can't you sit with me? None of the girls are coming. I thought it a mistake to insist, if ever the breach is to be healed."

"All right. You'll find me in the porch at a quarter to two, I'm meeting Mrs. Hodge then to smuggle her in."

Jasmine stooped and kissed her.

"Quarter to two. I'm glad you're back. What are your plans?"

"I hope to let the flat, and then I thought I'd wander again and look at a few more ports."

Jasmine went to the door.

"You might do worse than marry Ossie, he's a nice thing, and simply rolling. See you later."

Mouse listened to the front door shutting. Queer.

Jasmine had once said about physical love—"It's the understanding of each other that comes from it. You'd think with three children Jim and I would have got it, but I hated the business." At that time she had discounted the statement, she had thought it was she who was missing the finer shades. Now she knew that Jasmine had never even felt the brush of passing love. Marriage! Ossie!

Fanny opened her door, her face lit up.

"Oh, Miss Shane, it is nice to see you again. I have missed you. Did you have a good time? You're earlier than I expected, but I've just done. I've got a bit to finish in the bedroom."

"That's all right. Have the clothes come?"

"Came yesterday. Oh, they are lovely."

"You go and finish, I'll have a word with your husband."

George was sorting potatoes. He nodded to Mouse and held one up.

"See these? All me own growin'."

"Aren't they fine? I've come down to help Mrs. Elk to dress and to take you both to the wedding."

"Not me. Mrs. Elk's pleased with the invite, so we won't say nothin', but Floss never sent it, I know that. A weddin' should 'ave the bride's mother up at the front, and the bride's father givin' 'er away. There's to be none of that, that I've 'eard."

"No. I've been away, I've had nothing to do with the arrangements."

"We was pleased to get your post cards. Nice to do a bit of travellin'." He came over to her and lowered his voice: "Do you know this Lord Menton Floss is marryin'?"

"Yes, well."

"Would you call 'im a good God-fearin' young chap?"

Mouse tried to consider Derwent from that point of view.

"That's not really how I should think of anybody. But he's nice."

"Does he look after his people right, and make himself a good example in that 'igh state of life to which God 'as called 'im?"

"God hasn't called him to it very long; he only came into the title and place last summer when his uncle was drowned."

"That was a bad business. It don't seem right 'er marryin' 'im somehow when she was the cause of 'im becomin' 'oo 'e is."

"He's been in love with her for years."

"Why did they 'ave to wait for this to 'appen then before they married?"

"There wasn't enough money."

"Does it seem right to you, Miss Shane?"

Mouse stared unseeingly at the vegetables in the window.

"It's difficult for me to be fair. I knew the late Lord Menton very well."

Fanny came through the door from the kitchen.

"I'm ready to put on me dress. Won't you change your mind, George?"

"No." George went back to his potatoes. "I've me book, I shall sit quietly here and follow the service at two o'clock. She'll have my prayers just as good as she would in the church."

"You should come though. They say the church is all done up with white flowers and tubs of oranges. You'd like to see oranges growing."

"No. I'm looking after the shop. And don't you go gettin' yourself all fussed up, you know how it'll be with your inside if you get fussin'."

Upstairs in the bedroom were laid out a simple but smart grey frock and coat, and there were gloves and a hat. Fanny looked at them trembling with ecstasy.

"Aren't they smart? I was so in a fluster at your dressmaker's that I should have chosen all wrong, but she said to leave it to her. Oh, it was good of you, Miss Shane." She took off her apron and working skirt and blouse, and began some violent washing in the basin on the stand in the corner. "Before your letter came I'd had the invite, and I didn't know what to do about clothes, I thought maybe I'd get taken for one of her servants or something, but when I'd been to your dressmaker I came back

and I said to Mr. Elk, 'I'll have to keep out of sight at the weddin' or, dressed up the way I'll be, everybody'll know I must be a relative.' " She dried her face and hands. "I had a nice wash earlier so that'll do." She looked down at her petticoat. "I bought this silk slip special, they say things sit nicer over silk." Mouse lifted the frock off the bed and put it over her head. She hooked it and pulled down the skirt. Fanny looked anxiously at her stomach. "Of course, my inside being the way it is, I stick out a mite. Would you say it showed to matter?"

Mouse gravely regarded the bulge, the twin to Mrs. Hodge's cottage-loaf effect. She shook her head.

"No. It's the fashionable slink. Stomachs are worn this year. Now sit down." She opened her bag and took out a box of rouge, a powder puff, and a tiny pot of cream. Deftly she took the shine out of Fanny's nose, and put a tinge of colour into her yellow cheeks. She took the hat off the bed, and with the aid of a comb and some hair-pins set it at a becoming angle. "Now look at yourself."

Fanny went to the mirror, and blushed at her own good looks. She made clicking sounds with her tongue against her teeth. "Oh, I say! You wouldn't know me, and that's a fact." She turned back to the glass and peered at her face anxiously. "Would you think, got up like this, people would know I was Floss's mum from the likeness? I don't want to upset her."

Mouse shook her head, she could have laughed or cried. Like Flossie! Poor, plain, shabby, little woman.

"No," she said kindly, "you're quite different types."

Fanny was like a shy schoolgirl when she went into the shop to show herself to George. She stood awkward and giggling in the doorway. He went to the drawer of the till, and took something out and came to her with it held behind his back. Suddenly he produced a spray of white carnations.

"Here," he said to Mouse, "you pin 'em on, I'd be afraid I'd make a mark." He gave Fanny a kiss. "Off you go, enjoy yourself. You look the bride's mother and no mistake."

"Oh, sssh," Fanny stopped him. "Whatever would she say if she could hear you?"

"She couldn't say you didn't do 'er credit any'ow. Off you go. Enjoy yourself."

He leant on his baskets of fruit, and watched Fanny climb, twittering with excitement, into the impressive Rolls, and he watched it drive off with the eyes of all the street peering from behind curtains at its departure. He stayed where he was for a few moments staring at the empty street. Without his knowledge two tears rolled down his cheeks.

"My girl's weddin' day. May God bless 'er," he whispered.

CHAPTER XX

FLOSSIE, on the arm of an aged cousin of Derwent's, moved slowly up the aisle, while the choir sang exquisitely.

"Love divine, all loves excelling."

Flossie's head was decently bowed as became a shy bride. Her white clinging dress was designed to show every line of her. It would have been an insult to the designer of that dress if one curve of Flossie had been a secret. Many of the men in the congregation looked from the bride to their wives. Nice women, members of nice clubs where they played bridge. Nevertheless, looking at them, it was hard to contemplate, without envy, Derwent's honeymoon. Flossie had dispensed with the usual flowers and her free hand held instead a white ivory prayer book. Her face shrouded in its veil, with the eyes downcast to her book, had the sweetness and purity of a small saint from a church window. Behind her, holding her immense train, toddled six little things in rose-coloured frills, and wearing rose-wreaths. All were Menton connections, and therefore suitably well bred.

The service was read with great beauty by a bishop, cousin of the bridegroom, and though,

when it came to the responses, Derwent, blind and dazed with happiness, could only mutter, Flossie spoke up excellently. Her voice rang to the very last seat in the church, into which Mouse had smuggled Mrs. Hodge.

“—to be my wedded husband, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love, cherish and to obey, till death do us part—”

“Oh dear! Oh my!” Tears rained down Mrs. Hodge’s nose, she forgot that once she, for Alfie, had said those selfsame words.

Fanny mopped her eyes. She did wish George was here. Such a gorgeous wedding, and the way Floss spoke up, anybody could hear she loved him.

Ossie blew his nose. She spoke so trustfully, he hoped she’d be happy, but she looked such a kid.

Jasmine dug her elbows into Mouse at ‘richer, for poorer.’

“He’d better make it richer,” she whispered.

Later, when the champagne had been drunk, and the cake cut, and healths toasted, Flossie went upstairs to change into the blue creation the dressmakers were waiting to put on her. She stood entranced while first the dressmakers’ assistants, and then the porters who came for the luggage, called her ‘My Lady.’ Mouse had come up to help, but

there was nothing for her to do, so she leant out of the window to stare at the eager crowd below and the battalions of cameras. Over everything clanged the church bells. Suddenly it all got on her none too steady nerves.

"Oh, blast those bells."

The dressmakers stared at her with their mouths open. Flossie's head shot up.

"That's not a very pretty way to speak. What can be sweeter than wedding bells?"

"What indeed, my Lady," said the dressmakers. Mouse grinned.

"Nothing, unless it's marriage settlements."

THE END

